

ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION

VICTORY
AT
OSTAGAR
BOOK
FIVE



THE RED QUEEN

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A RED HEN PUBLICATION



AN ADVENTURES IN FANFICTION EDITION
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THE RED QUEEN

VICTORY AT OSTAGAR

VOLUME FIVE

BY

ARSINOE DE BLASSEVILLE



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THE RED QUEEN

CHAPTER I

T

A WAITING GAME

THE MARQUIS IS NOT IN JADER AT ALL," Zevran told Bronwyn, on his return from his latest spying expedition. "He

has not been in Jader since before Satinalia. He is, however, expected on the first of Drakonis, along with a mighty host."

"How mighty is 'mighty?'" Bronwyn asked, wanting to know the worst.

"I cannot give you exact numbers, my Queen, but the levy barracks can accommodate five thousand. The chevaliers' quarters and stables have room for one thousand, both men and horses."

"Maker!"

With thirty Wardens under her command alone, Bronwyn would ordinarily have considered herself to command a powerful force. They were not all she had, however. There were seven hundred men at the Halt, and an auxiliary force of two hundred dwarves, mostly Legion of the Dead. Stationed at the Halt were a score of clever scouts and rangers, mostly Avvars, who were not at all hindered

by the weather, but were out and about, probing the borderlands. Cavalry she had none: there were no more than two dozen horses at the Halt.

From time to time, more came to join her: volunteers from the hill country, attracted by her fame, some farmer boys and girls from the Neck, small bands of mercenaries with no better prospects in view, a handful of surface dwarves hired on by her engineers, and some rag and tag that might include a few apostate mages. Altogether, her complement might actually number a thousand, though it fluctuated slightly with the weather and the irregulars' resultant mood.

However, if her thousand tried to confront the Orlesian's six thousand in open battle, things might not go well, unless she was very, very clever, and very, very lucky. And very well prepared.

The ground here, fortunately for her, was not well-suited to the deployment of a large force of cavalry. The pass had too many bottlenecks to admit more than a few dozen at once. Theoretically they would crush all before them, but not if massed archers were positioned to fire volley after volley down on them from cover. And now Bronwyn had ballistae and some of the new trebuchets, which could launch explosive missiles. Horses would not like explosives. If she could create enough of a panic, any Orlesian assault might end in a disaster for the enemy: knights and untrained levies trampled underfoot by frenzied, armored warhorses.

Working under cover of night, mines had been laid in the pass, set to go off by the touch of levers concealed in the bluffs. More explosives had been set above ledges and outcrops: man-made rockslides that could be set off with a touch, burying an invading force under tons of rubble.

Of course, the Orlesians might not choose to go through the Pass. Bronwyn hoped they would, but the possibility remained that the Orlesians might try to be tricky, and would take the hill trail out of Jader: the same rough road that Brosca had taken when she infiltrated the city. It connected with the Imperial Highway. If the Orlesians took the hill trail, they would be slow, but they might hope to surprise the Fereldans, and thunder down, besieging Gherlen's Halt, and sweeping east across the Neck to the Fereldan heartlands.

And of course, Zevran was only giving her information about the kind of garrison Jader itself could support. If the rest of the Imperial army attacked, it could mean another ten... another fifteen thousand troops. They could not strip the Nevarran border, but they had immense reserves.

Loghain was mustering the Fereldans. If the Bannorn provided decent levies and the numbers were made up from those lost in the spring and summer campaign against the darkspawn, Ferelden could field here in the northeast, maybe... another four thousand. For Ferelden, also, could not strip its cities of protection and its coastline of guards. For now, it was a waiting game.

If the Orlesians looked like they would make their move before Loghain arrived, Bronwyn would have to make a preemptive strike that would knock them off balance. The dockyard would be fired, and the barracks demolished. Bronwyn had a large store of explosives, which had grown larger since Alistair had arrived with Adaia and Siofranni. Those explosives were being quietly planted in the cellars of the barracks, cleverly concealed. In a few daring missions to Jader, some of their loyal surface dwarves had moved through the sewers, following the maps drawn from the information given by Brosca, by the Avvar scouts, and now by Zevran.

Zevran was an immensely useful spy, because he was not an actual Warden, and none of the Jader Wardens could sense him. Morrigan too, had slipped into Jader, part of the time as an inquisitive hawk, and part of the time as a modestly-dressed and masked woman. Anders sometimes went, but only in his animal forms, since he was undetectable as a Grey Warden that way: flying in as a raven, and now that he had mastered the shape, prowling about as a cat. A neat-whiskered ginger tomcat found good pickings and plenty of friendly folk in Jader — talkative people, too, in the Marquis' Palace, in the Chantry, in the barracks, in the market. On one occasion, all three of them explored Jader together: a lady with her elven servant and her pet cat.

"Tis utterly ridiculous," Morrigan said, after her that mission. "Do these Orlesians not understand that people

in masks cannot be trusted?"

Yet it was the custom of the country: a perfectly absurd custom that permitted hostile foreigners to walk among them, undiscovered and unafraid.

"I like Jader," Anders declared. "Good food. The seafood stew is something special. And the sausages. Jaderites have sound ideas about spicy sausages."

They kept a succession of lookouts up at the hunting lodge, walking down to watch the Imperial Highway. They kept lookouts at the secret rock openings near Solidor. They patrolled the Deep Roads, senses straining to catch any darkspawn movement. And they patrolled the Neck, that vulnerable territory between the Orlesian border and the River Dane. The weather was not their friend on some of these ventures, but it was not the Orlesians' friend, either.

Once Alistair had arrived at the end of Wintermarch, Bronwyn had reorganized her Wardens into four teams, trying to rebalance the groups according to abilities and temperament. All the teams needed a mage and archers. They needed at least two heavily armored swordsmen or axemen. They needed someone good with locks and traps. Some wished to stay with the people they had grown fond of: Danith's team was remarkably cohesive.

Ultimately, Bronwyn wanted to have a dog in every team. Her delight when Alistair arrived, accompanied by darling little Scrapper, was great indeed. She knew, of course about Carver and Jowan's dogs, and planned to

integrate them into her arrangements if they survived the Nevarran embassy. If she ever saw them again.

There was a small kennel at Gherlen's Halt, and she liked to include men with dogs in her missions. Bronwyn had ideas about new uses for dogs. A dog could not reasonably be used to break up a chevalier's charge. A dog was simply not a match for a horse and man in heavy armor. For that matter, using the dogs against massed darkspawn at the Bloomingtide Battle had not worked very well. A dog was a splendid asset in a skirmish, but not in a pitched battle.

However, Fereldan mabari were smart. Very smart. She had them running messages now. They knew people by name, once they were properly introduced, and they never forgot those people's individual scents. A dog could find anyone, given time. And they could sniff about in the woods, playing the stray, slipping through the underbrush: or they could trot along a dirty alley, pissing against the walls. As dogs, they were both above and below suspicion.

Restless, in need of exercise and air, Bronwyn rode out with some of her people to have a look at the Imperial Highway. Winter often damaged the roads, even the Imperial Highway, designed and constructed by brilliant Tevinter magisters long ago. The extent of damage caused by frost heaving was no worse than usual, and certainly would not be a barrier to troop movements. The sun shone down, melting snow on the stones and on the naked branches

of the dragonthorn trees. The ground itself was still very cold, and remained shrouded with white.

Once out, she took advantage of the cloudless day to ride to the outpost at the hunting lodge, to see how Danith and her people were faring.

Well, as it happened. The site was very agreeable to them. There was shelter and warmth, but also open air and the opportunity to hunt, when it was not snowing heavily. The Dalish among them found it pleasant compromise between proper elvhen accommodations and shemlen luxury. Their Avvar rangers, Bustrum and Ostap, spent a great deal of time there, and could take others with them when they scouted over the border. Quinn, of course, bundled in furs, looked like an Avvar himself — though a very young, beardless Avvar.

Bronwyn liked the change herself, and sent a messenger back to the Halt to tell them she would be out overnight. She was not too grand to sleep on a blanket on a rough wooden floor.

Nuala and Steren went out to stand guard. The rest settled down around the fire, while Aeron plucked lazily at his lute. It was a quiet night, and Bronwyn cherished it. This all reminded her pleasantly of her early days of adventure, when she did not live in the grubby grandeur of Gherlen's Halt.

"Who's got a bed-time story for us?" Anders asked. "This is all so cozy and friendly that a little entertainment would be just the thing. Whose turn is it?"

Bronwyn honestly could not recall. Danith said, "My group was first, but Nuala and Steren are outside."

"What about it Quinn?" asked Maeve.

The boy was red in a frenzy of blushing. "I can't... I can't... I don't know any stories. You tell one for me, Maeve... you or Aeron."

Aeron shrugged. "I know heaps of stories. Most of them end very badly."

"I have a story," Maeve said, after a little hesitation. "Maybe I should tell it now."

MAEVE'S TALE OF THE SHOEMAKER'S SWEETHEART

There was a poor girl, and there was a poor boy, and they were in love. So many stories start like that, but it's a truth of life, that there are more poor young couples than rich ones. They wanted to marry, for the girl loved her boy more than anything in the world. He was all she had, for her parents had died, and she was alone.

But they had nothing to live on, and must keep their love secret. The boy was only a shoemaker's apprentice, bound to his master, and the girl lived with her second cousins, who grudged her house room. They hated the boy, and had forbidden the girl to have anything to do with him. So it was. The boy's only wealth was his cleverness, and the girl's only wealth was her strong body and her shining hair.

They met only at the dark of the moon behind a corner of the chantry, and there they kissed and shared their troubles. "Even

once my apprenticeship is over," the boy said, one night, "We'll still need capital for me to set up shop. And the town doesn't need another shoemaker. We'll need to move to Gwaren or even Denerim. Moving is very expensive. So is furnishing a home." He shook his head sadly. "I don't know where the money's to come from."

"I can help!" said the girl. "I'm strong! I can milk the neighbor's cows and help with the butchering. I work for my keep already at my cousin's, so every copper I earn will go to our future."

The boy told her she was wonderful, and kissed her. He showed her one of his old socks, where everything she earned would be saved. The boy promised to keep the sock under his pillow at his master's, since he pointed out that she had to share a room, and he could better keep their nest egg secure.

So the time passed, and the girl worked, very, very hard to earn money. Other boys noticed that she was pretty and hard-working, and they came to court her, but she always refused them, for her heart already belonged to another. Her cousins grew nastier and nastier, and her life harder and harder. She worked on, but she earned only coppers, and they had less than a hundred of those.

One day, a rich merchant came to call. He had the best house in the village, and he was looking for a new housekeeper. He was old and fat, but amusing and full of stories. He told the girl's cousins that that the girl would suit him very well, and he promised her a fine wage for taking care of his house.

Indeed it was such a fine wage that it was perfectly clear that he was engaging her as more than a housekeeper. The merchant already had a wife, but she was sickly and kept to her room. What

the merchant wanted was a pretty young girl to cook his meals and sleep in his bed. The cousins thought it a good way to get rid of the girl, and gave her no peace, telling her why she should be grateful for such a good opportunity.

In the dark of the moon, the girl met with her sweetheart, and told him that her family wanted her to be the mistress of the rich merchant. Instead of being horrified for her, or indignant, the boy rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "this might be the chance we've been waiting for. No, don't look at me like that. I know it's a sacrifice, but look at it this way: I'm sacrificing too, by honoring my bond to my master. I'm learning the trade that will bring us a living. It's only fair that you should earn enough to get us started. The merchant isn't a bad fellow. He'll be kind and generous, and we'll save money more quickly than ever. My bond will be over in a year. With luck, we'll have enough to leave and make our start in life by then... if you take advantage of this great opportunity!"

The girl did not like it, but the boy was very clever, and made more sensible arguments in favor of his plan. Thus it came to pass that the girl went to the house of the merchant, and gave him the thing she had been saving for her wedding day. And she gave it again, and again. The merchant was pleased with her, and gave her fine clothes and plenty of coin. And the girl gave every piece of silver to her sweetheart, and he put it in the sock.

Time passed. At Summersday his bond would be fulfilled. Surely they had enough money to start their new life by now. One day, in the last month, the girl walked past their secret meeting

place behind a corner of the Chantry, and heard the boy's voice. Before she could call out to him, she realized that he was not alone.

"In a month my master will release me! We'll be married and start our new life!"

"Oh, how wonderful!" replied the voice of a young woman. "My family will be so happy, too. They've always liked you. They think you're so clever, the way you've saved so much coin."

The boy's voice was smug. "And there's more where that came from yet."

The girl stood still as if turned to stone, her heart racked with anguish. After a time, she crept away, not wanting to hear their words of love, too ashamed to speak to anyone.

At the dark of the moon, she hardly knew what to do. Part of her never wanted to see her boy again, and part of her wanted to plead with him not to betray her, to try to make him see how much she loved him and that all she had done had been for him. At last she decided to go. It was difficult to wait. Quiet and still, she endured the merchant's attentions, until he was satisfied and snoring. Then she slipped from the bed and dressed quickly, taking with her the coin that the merchant had given her that month.

She slipped along the walls, hidden by the shadows, until she darted behind the corner of the Chantry. There the boy waited for her. He kissed her, and admired the size of the purse in her hands. The girl fumbled with it nervously, making the silver jingle.

"We're going to have plenty to start our new life," he promised her. "Let me see what you brought!"

"If only I could see it," she whispered. "If only I could see the coin

we've saved all together. I know it's only a month, but sometimes it's so hard..."

"Wait here!" Greed gave wings to the boy's feet. In no time he was back, carrying the bulging sock. The girl put out her hands, and reluctantly the boy let her hold it.

Suddenly she slammed the sock into the boy's face with all her strength, breaking his nose. She hit him again, and he went down in a heap, groaning. Then she spat on him.

"I know about you and your real betrothed, " she snarled, overflowing with bitterness. "And this coin is mine, earned with my shame and my foolish love for a cheat and a pimp!"

Her skirts swirled around her as she turned and left him. Quickly she went back to the merchant's house. There she gathered up a cloak and some food. She put the sock of silver in a bag, and at dawn she left the town. She walked, and kept on walking. When she reached Gwaren, she bought armor and weapons, and cut her lovely hair. She enlisted in the army, and never looked back.

There was a silence, since a number of people guessed that this was not simply a story.

Quinn, less knowledgeable in the ways of the world, scowled, and said, "I'd punch him in the face, too! That was rotten, cheating on his girl like that! And making her live with somebody else... I'm glad she got away!"

Bronwyn gave Maeve a wry smile. "So am I."

They were mounting up for the return the following morning, when a warbling birdcall alerted them to danger. One of the Avvars on guard duty had spotted strangers approaching. Bronwyn dashed down to the cover of the surrounding pines, and followed Bustrum's pointing finger. A quick glance reassured her that these were friends — or at least, not enemies. Two riders, heavily cloaked, but who wore blue and grey under their furs. She stepped out from cover to greet them.

"Senior Warden Riordan," she said, feeling rather wary. "And—"

"Warden Fiona!" Danith said, giving a slight, courteous bow.

"Well met," Bronwyn said, wondering what they wanted. There was no harm in being polite, unless they made that the untenable option.

Riordan inclined his head. "Your Majesty." Fiona looked very displeased, but gave Bronwyn a brisk nod.

"Just a Warden in this company," Bronwyn replied. "I am glad to see you well."

Immediately, she invited them into the lodge to rest and join them in a meal. Any meal. The Wardens' more-or-less-never-ending-meal. Naturally, they accepted. There was a warming stew of venison, barley and forest mushrooms. With pan-bread to sop in it, it was hearty enough even for Wardens. They spoke of inconsequential things: the weather, the scarcity of game, of their horses. Bronwyn introduced her Wardens to them. It was useless to try to hide their existence, when they were clearly Wardens, and Riordan, from

his expression, had already sensed them as such.

Once they had eaten, Bronwyn knew it was time to hear what they had come to say.

"You are bold to ride out to meet us."

"Everyone knows you're here in the west, it's true," Fiona said. "Everyone. Jader is uneasy."

"Uneasy?" Bronwyn scoffed. "*Ferelden* is uneasy. I don't recall that *Ferelden* occupied and oppressed any part of Orlais for over eighty years! The Knight-Divine all but declared war on us for the sake of our mage allies. Blight or no, we have little choice but to ready the border for what everyone knows is coming. Why is *Jader* uneasy?"

"Sister," Riordan said, slightly emphasizing the word. "We know that one of your Wardens was in Jader not long ago. A dwarf. She was not one of ours, and thus she was one of yours."

Maeve and Quinn snickered, nudging each other. Anders and Morrigan smirked.

Bronwyn glanced at them in quick reproof, and then looked down her nose at the Orlesians. "She might have been Nevarran. They are no friends of Orlais, either. Or a Marcher. Just someone who had heard of the beauties of Jader and wished to see them for herself."

Riordan grimaced. Fiona, caring nothing for social niceties, was more forthright.

"It is useless to dissemble. Based on the description, we guessed it was Warden Brosca. We met her! We performed the Joining for her! A Warden should not be scouting for

anything but darkspawn!"

"The presence of a foreign Warden could not be kept secret," Riordan said heavily. "Others know she was there. Word spread through the city, that the Red Queen sent one of her Wardens to infiltrate Jader."

"Brosca's not afraid of anything!" whispered Aeron, with a light laugh.

Bronwyn did not feel she owed the Orlesians any apology. "Hmmm. And why do you suppose I might think it a sound scheme to have a trusted friend enter Jader? What might be happening in Jader that might hinder my own efforts to fight the darkspawn? Everyone in Jader knows what's going on. I presume you do, too. I think an Orlesian invasion is going to be quite the problem, personally. And we've had fair warning. The Empress has tried to kill me, long before I became Queen. She tried to kill me while I was merely a Warden. Look to your own ruler, if you want to blame someone who cares little for fighting the Blight."

"You do not think claiming the throne of *Ferelden* was a provocation?"

The *Fereldan* Wardens rolled their eyes. At least the humans. The dwarves were bored. The elves looked on impassively. *Fereldan* shemlens were bad enough. Orlesians were far worse. And Bronwyn had given them a homeland after all, something which they knew the Orlesian Empress would never have done.

Bronwyn actually laughed. "I suppose it was at that!" She

fixed her poison-green gaze on the her guests. "And I really don't care. I believe she would have attacked, whether I took the throne or not. And the Empress disgusts me. She knows what she did to my family. It took some time, but now I know, too. If she had not them murdered them to further her other schemes, my father would have been alive to take the throne that should have been his five years ago."

Riordan, all at sea, shook his head. "I do not understand what you mean."

"The Empress sent a bard to coordinate an elaborate plot against my family, tricking a friend into thinking them traitors, forging documents that launched a massacre. You might say that the Empress... made me Queen of Ferelden. But I shall never thank her for it." Bronwyn's good humor dissipated, reminded of that night. "No, my brother Warden, I feel I've done as I had to do. We know the darkspawn will rise soon. They are not dead or defeated, but merely taking shelter from the winter's cold. With the first thaw they will be upon us again. And Ferelden can expect to be attacked not just by them, but by our neighbors. Words cannot convey what I think of those who would in effect ally themselves with the darkspawn."

"I could think of a *few words*," growled Niall under his breath.

Bronwyn sighed, and then cocked her head. "What it is you want of me? What are you asking?"

"The Wardens of Jader..." Riordan paused, and then steeled himself. "The Wardens of Orlais sent us to talk to you... to

remind you of your oath and your duty... and to urge you to remain neutral in any war between nations." He gave an elegant Orlesian shrug. "I told them it was useless."

"Of course it is," Aveline said, backing Bronwyn up. "Orlesian Wardens can stand back because their country isn't under attack. They don't have to worry about their friends dying. They can be neutral because the Imperial army is so huge that nobody's going to ask them to join in the attack."

Fiona scowled at Bronwyn. "And *you* gave Alistair a noble title!"

"He didn't like it," Anders was blunt to the point of rudeness. "He was ambushed! He'll get used to it, though."

"Alistair is the son of a king," Bronwyn said coolly. "His paternity deserves to be recognized and honored. In my opinion, Maric was wrong to keep it secret. And Alistair has done Ferelden worthy service. If I can be Queen, I could hardly be so hypocritical as to say that Alistair could not be a bann."

"Neither of you should be either!" Fiona snapped. "The title of Warden is good enough for anyone!"

"Ordinarily, I would agree," said Bronwyn, for the sake of civility; though she actually hated being a Warden, and bitterly resented Duncan's high-handed behavior in forcing her to Join the order. "However," she continued, "this is a Blight, and everything is different. The King of Ferelden was killed by darkspawn, leaving no child. The succession had to be resolved, and leadership was needed. As both a Warden and a Queen of Ferelden, I can make the Blight my

first priority. Which it is, whether you choose to believe me or not. If the Empress had not attempted my assassination, Loghain's assassination, Anora's assassination, and the assassination of every lord and lady conveniently available, we would not need to be here, watching the Orlesian border. If the Knight-Divine had not threatened us, and attempted to arrest the Grand Cleric of Ferelden, we would not need to be watching the Orlesian border. If Duke Prosper de Monfort had not told us that our only safety was in accepting the status of a conquered people, we would not need to be watching the Orlesian border. But all these things have been done. And so, in order to fight the darkspawn, we must also watch the Orlesian border, lest we be overwhelmed and can no longer fight the darkspawn at all."

Scout gave a bark of approval. Riordan smiled ruefully.

"And what will your watching accomplish? What can you do against the fury of the Imperial Army?"

"I can..." she hesitated, not about to give them useful military intelligence. Instead she said. "...I cannot lie down and die. I *will* defend my people, and that includes the *mag*es," Bronwyn said, glaring at Fiona. "Yes, the mag^es, who have rallied to fight the darkspawn according to the ancient treaties. The Divine seems to have a problem with that, though it has been done in Blights past without opposition. All we can assume is that the Divine's devotion to Orlais and its interests outweighs all else: her responsibility to a Thedas beset by a Blight; the traditional

precedents; even the decency of letting the mag^es come forward and fulfill their obligations."

Riordan was sympathetic. It was obvious from his posture and his tense expression. Bronwyn pressed him.

"It seems to me, that you should be siding with me, in fact. I've been actually fighting the darkspawn. I think the lot of you Orlesian Wardens should ride over the border and stand with us. You must have had the dreams; you must have seen the signs. The darkspawn will rise soon."

"If only we could!" said Riordan. "We might indeed ride over the border and join you, but riding *back* might be a matter more difficult to accomplish."

"And who knows where the darkspawn will attack?" Fiona pointed out. She pulled herself together, and managed a reasonable tone. "It could be in Ferelden, but it could be in the Anderfels... or in faraway Rivain. Who can say?"

"Yes," Bronwyn nodded. "I understand the argument. I have read it in the letters I have received from the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra and Antiva, who were good enough to respond to my queries." She laughed suddenly. "I wrote to the First Warden, too, since I thought he would like to know about how I killed the Architect."

Fiona's jaw dropped. "You slew the Architect? But..."

"I really must return to the Halt now," Bronwyn interrupted. "My Wardens can tell you about it, if you wish to remain, but I am expected elsewhere.. But yes, the Architect is dead. He was hiding in a deep mine in Amaran-

thine. Now he is no more."

"We'll tell them them!" Aveline promised. "Every detail... including the part about you riding the dragon."

The Orlesians paused, staring at the red-haired Warden in shock. Bronwyn smiled to herself, and got up to do.

"I would be grateful," said Riordan, following Bronwyn to the door. "We must leave ourselves, very soon, if we are to be back in Jader before dark. We swore to our Wardens that we be as discreet as possible. The civil authorities know nothing of this meeting."

They stepped outside, and Quinn and Aeron hurried to saddle the horses. Bronwyn tugged her cloak around her, thinking.

"Then tell your Wardens..." she said. "Tell them that instead of urging me not to defend my country, perhaps they should be urging their 'civil authorities' to have the decency not to take advantage of a neighbor under attack by darkspawn. It's despicable and cowardly. If they thought about it clearly, they would see that I cannot do other than I am. I do not know from which direction the darkspawn will attack, but I definitely know from which direction Orlais is going to attack, and thus I am here, rather than patrolling the Deep Roads."

There seemed little more to be said. Bronwyn wondered if the Orlesian Wardens knew anything about Riordan and Fiona's prior venture into Ferelden — one that now seemed to have come back to haunt them. However, even if they

had not come to perform the Joining, Bronwyn believed it would not have been the end of the world for her. She would still have gathered her recruits, and when they reached Soldier's Peak, they could have been Joined at that point. Very likely, more of the recruits would have survived, since they would have used Avernus' improved potion. Bronwyn considered mentioning the potion, and decided not to muddy the waters. Once the Blight was over and the Archdemon dead, she might be inclined to be generous.

"I thank you for telling me of your concerns, and for the pains you took to come here," she said, after a silence. "It is growing late, and I was pleased to see you again. You have done your duty to us."

"Then I wish you well, Queen Bronwyn," said Riordan. "For while we are Orlesian and Fereldan, we are also brother and sister."

"And I wish you well also, Riordan of Jader." Bronwyn shrugged. "And you, Fiona. We are all in the Maker's hands." She and her party mounted up, and prepared to move out.

"Wait!" called Riordan. Bronwyn turned in her saddle.

The Orlesian asked, "Did you really find the Ashes of Andraste?"

Bronwyn smiled. "I did."

She kicked her horse into motion, and cantered away. Behind her the Orlesians watched her out of sight, until Danith cleared her throat, and led them back into the lodge.

A long cold walk it was, exposed to the harsh southwest wind. Tara pulled her hood down further over her face and trudged on. If she did not investigate the Aeonar now, there would be no time later.

Only one of her party was human, and Catriona very vocally did not give a dead rat for the Chantry. It made things convenient. Why Catriona disliked the Chantry Tara was not sure, and the archer did not volunteer information. It involved her family in some way, and when she did speak of the Chantry or the Templars, she sounded bitter.

But it was certainly convenient. If Leliana were here, there would be some awkwardness. There might even be a crisis, just as there had been when Danith's loyalty had been torn between the Wardens and a Dalish Keeper, and the Wardens had come off a distant second.

Her own party had no such divided loyalties. Darach treated her with more respect than Tara often felt she deserved. As for the dwarves who made up the rest of the party, they found the power of the Chantry inexplicable and rather absurd. Broasca and Sigrun joked about it. Ulfa and Soren considered it proof positive of the mental inferiority of humans.

Bronwyn had given her considerable latitude when she sent her out on this long patrol. Tara traveled both on the surface and by the Deep Roads. She had spent a pleasant, nostalgic two days at the Spoiled Princess Inn, looking across Lake Calenhad at Kinloch Hold, home of the Circle, and her own home for most of her life. Now and then Tara felt a curi-

ous desire to see the place again, but that was not going to happen: not unless she managed to master shape-shifting, and flew there as a bird, unannounced and undetected.

Those days at the Spoiled Princess had given her and her party the energy to undertake this last leg of her journey, back up to the coast and to the Aeonar. Tara was determined to see it for herself. All the excuse she needed was that she was tracking darkspawn. The Templars would have little to say to counter that.

Still, there might be a fight. Too bad. She would not lead her people into any fight she was not sure she could win, but at this point, Tara was fairly confident of her party's ability to win even against great odds. They would penetrate into the prison — or whatever it was — and get some answers. What were the Templars up to? Tara suspected that at least some of them would support the Orlesians when they came. The Aeonar might well be a supply depot waiting for an invasion force.

Smoke rose from the nearby cottage. Tara led her people around to the other side, sheltered by the slope. The little docks at the shore were completely iced in. It was likely that no vessels had come since Tara was last here.

And no guards were at the entrance, either. Why would there be? There were few travelers this time of year, and the structure was imperceptible from the road. The ancient doors had long since caved in, and clutter filled the entry. The weather, however, had betrayed the occupants. Dirty

tracks in the snow were evidence, even to Tara's limited skills, that numerous people had been in and out of here since the most recent snowfall. The tracks wended around artfully strewn rubble and tree branches to the hidden entrance – the real entrance. The inner doors appeared at first, and even second glance, to be a stone wall, but closer examination revealed the long cracks and the hinges.

"Watch out!" whispered Catriona. "They're rigged."

"Sneaky bastards," grunted Brosca. Between them, the dwarf and the human laid bare trip wires and triggers. Once you knew they were there, they were not that hard to spot, since the Templar guards must be able to access the doors in safety.

It took some time. The massive entry afforded them shelter from the wind, at least. Tara hoped the doors were not barred from the inside, but she thought that unlikely.

Nor, when opened, did they creak. Warmer air flowed out, smelling strongly of damp and stone..

"Ahh!" sighed Sigrun. "Just like home."

"It does smell like Dust Town, at that," whispered Brosca, grinning. "Or like Dust Town would smell, if humans lived there."

They opened the door just enough to slip through, one at a time. Inside was a broad hall, with a pair of corridors leading off from it. In the center, an elaborate spiral staircase twisted down.

Faced with three choices, Tara went right, down the straight corridor, lit by crystals.

"Those are old," Tara whispered, pointing at the curious lights. "Really old. I've read about the Tevinters using them."

The crystals lent the corridor an eerie green light. The party opened doors cautiously, and found nothing but large storerooms packed with supplies. Tara made note of them, and considered coming back here to restock before they left.

They retraced their steps, moving silently, hearing indistinct echoes rumbling from the central staircase. Tara led them down the left corridor, and opened the first door.

And found herself in a well-appointed office, staffed by three priests, and a gangly and very young Templar recruit. All four shrieked girlishly at the sight of strangers.

"Maker's Breath!" Tara shouted. "We're Grey Wardens!"

The oldest of the priests clutched her heart, gasping. "What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"We've been tracking darkspawn," Tara told her, a bit glibly. "They hide in old tunnels and buildings, and lay traps just like the ones we found. We thought this was a nest."

Brosca forced back a grin, and poked Tara in the back. "You are such a liar!" she whispered, hand over her mouth.

Tara smiled sunnily. It was so much fun to lie to priests. Now they'd worry about darkspawn sneaking in. Good.

"So what is this place, anyway?" Sigrun piped up. "It's not a Chantry, is it? I thought those were above ground."

"No," Catriona said loudly. "It's not a Chantry. What are you ladies doing here, with only one Templar for protection?"

"It's not just us!" the youngest priest burst out. "Knight-

Commander Parrish has a full complement of —

The other priests shushed her. Tara came forward, shamelessly peering at the documents on the writing tables and files boxes. She paused at a roll that was headed "TRANQUILIZATIONS OF 9:30." Her amusement soured.

"Interesting place you've got here? What is this?"

"This is a legitimate Chantry holding," the elder priest told her haughtily.

"I'll bet it's not," Tara shot back. "I'll bet the King and Queen don't know about it. I'll bet there's no record of the Chantry owning property here." Her teeth curled back in a mirthless smile. "This is the Aeonar, isn't it?"

"Look here, Warden," the boy blustered. "You'll have to leave now. There will be a formal complaint to the First Warden!"

The Wardens burst out laughing.

"Good luck with that," snorted Brosca. "The First Warden doesn't even seem to know where Ferelden is. I think we should look around. The darkspawn could have tunneled into the lower levels."

This was greeted by the chantry folk with horror, for all sorts of reasons. Tara led her people out and then barricaded the door with a heavy storage case, trapping the office's occupants inside. The party then continued their examination of the rooms along the corridor. One, protected by intricate locks, contained an astonishing collection of magical items. Tara tried not to squeal aloud at the case containing a pair of genuine elven Sending Stones.

"What are they for?" Ulfa wondered.

Tara tossed one from one hand to the other, admiring its satin-smoothness. "Supposedly, you can send messages by them, if you have one and someone else has the other. The Chantry probably couldn't get them to work. These might not be usable anymore. I read that they were supposed to glow."

Darach was in awe. "I have heard of these. They were used in ancient Arlathan to connect the great lands of the elvhen."

"Let's take them along," Tara said, popping them into her pack. "Maybe Marethari or Merrill might know how to fix them. They're not doing any good here."

There were rare grimoires; there were crystals and statues, and a menacing little totem with long hair and creepily red eyes. There was no time to even go through the meticulous inventory that sat on a reading stand. Tara snatched up some items at random, and shared them out among her people.

"Let's have a look below."

It was not as huge as Tara had imagined it, or perhaps there were many levels below this one. There appeared to be quarters for no more than fifty Templars at a time, and about ten priests. There was a big kitchen and a refectory. A chapel, too, of course. They peered in, and slipped past. Most of the Templars were having a meal. The two that stepped out in front of the Wardens were struck with a sleep spell, and deposited in the empty chapel, behind the pew closest to the back wall.

And where the hall forked, there were cells. Down a

short flight of stairs, there were more cells, and the voice of one in the last stages of anguish.

"Maker... Maker... oh please... no... not that... not that... no... please... I'll do anything... I'm not a mage... oh, Maker, help me... Aaaaagh! Aaaaaaaaagh!"

Tara jerked her head, and the Wardens followed at a stealthy run. The door was half open, and was marked "INTERROGATION ROOM." A fancy title for a torture chamber.

A man was strapped to a chair, his head held unmoving in a metal frame. His jaw hung slack, and he was obviously either dead or unconscious. From the blood oozing from his ears and nose, Tara's guess was dead. A pair of Templars were wiping and putting away their implements. At a small table, a priest was writing rapidly, her quill scratching along the parchment at great speed.

Catriona gave Tara a hard nudge, her face contracted in rage. Tara put up a hand, and then gave a start, when she realized she recognized the priest.

"Hello, Lily! I haven't seen you since you were about to run away with Jowan."



Yes, it was definitely that Lily: the same plump cheeks, the same elaborately coiffed dark hair. Only she was in the robes of an ordained priest, not a mere initiate, as she had been in her Circle days. Lily looked back at her, and blinked, clearly not recognizing her.

The Templars lunged forward, Tara, her indignation

swelling her mana, froze them on the spot.

"Tie them up," she ordered. "And gag them. Brosca, watch the priest: she's sneaky. I need to have a look at him." She pointed at the bleeding man in the torture chair.

It was too late. Something had burned his brain from the inside out. Tara wished Anders or Jowan were here to analyze the condition of the man's body, but certain things were obvious to her – like the misshapen brand on the man's forehead. And the dropped iron, its head inlaid with lyrium, lying nearby.

"The Rite of Tranquility, somehow gone wrong. Interesting." She snatched the parchment off the writing table, away from Lily's twitching fingers, and skimmed through it.

"My, aren't you a thorough little secretary... even recording the moans and pleas of the dying." She read aloud from the transcript. *"Please... spare me... not my eyes... I haven't done anything... Aghhh! Maker! Aghhh!"*

She broke off, her eyes boring into the defiant priest. "You are a desperately sick fuck, you know that?"

"I remember you!" Lily burst out, the light dawning at last. "You're the knife-ears that clung to Jowan like fleas!"

"Ooo!" Brosca nodded appreciatively. "This one's feisty!"

Darach, on the other hand, was furious. "Watch your tongue, shemlen!" he warned. Tara gestured him back.

"I remember you," she said, her voice cold. "You're the liar who pretended to be in love with Jowan. It was all a set-up, wasn't it? A trap to lure mages into trying to escape, so the

Templars would have an excuse to kill them. You told Jowan that they were planning to make him Tranquil, pushing him until he was desperate enough to try to break out. Only he really did get away, didn't he? You didn't expect him to have the power to knock everyone down!"

"A Blood Mage!" Lily spat. "It was rumored, but he seemed too weak. We were hoping to crack a suspected coven of maleficar. But I didn't lie about making him Tranquil. He was on the list. Suspect mages must be culled."

Sigrun shook her head in wonder, and remarked, "You're just making friends all over the place today, aren't you?" She began sorting through the various implements in the room, while Tara read through the rest of the notes.

"What are you looking for?" Catriona asked.

"This man wasn't a mage, but they tried to make him Tranquil all the same. They've done it before, it seems. It looks like sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. I think I'll take these notes, Lily, thank you very much. Maybe, among us — Anders and I... and Petra, Niall... and Jowan — we can figure out what you're doing here. Yes, *Jowan*. He's a Grey Warden now, just like me. He healed Queen Anora, and he's a friend of Queen Bronwyn. He's far beyond your power to hurt now, you conniving bitch. When Bronwyn hears about what you're doing here, she'll shut you down."

Brosca leaned close, and spoke in Lily's ear. "And Jowan's got a new girl, too. Pretty little thing, with black hair. Crazy about him. So all you did was give him a happy

ending. Sucks, doesn't it?"

Ulfa blinked, "You mean the...?" Sigrun gave her a dig in the ribs, and Ulfa snorted. "Yeah, *her*. Crazy about him."

Lily's plump cheeks were red with fear and anger. "The Grey Wardens are fools to try to take on the Chantry! When the Divine hears of this outrage..."

To everyone's surprise, Catriona slapped her face.

"Oh, shut up about the Chantry! You people are disgusting!"

Tara blinked, but went with the flow of events. "When *Bronwyn* hears about this, she'll want to know if the Grand Cleric knows about it, and then..."

"The Grand Cleric knows nothing!" Lily shouted, clutching at her cheek. "Do you think that doddering fool would be trusted with sensitive information? We operate under the direct control of Her Perfection, and if you think..."

Brosca clapped a hand over Lily's mouth. "You're just going to get yourself slapped again, your Holiness, if you go on like that. Look, Tara, we should get out of here. Not that I don't think we can take fifty Templars, but they might take some of us, too, you see."

Tara bit her lip, looking at her loyal friends. She would like to destroy this vile place and set every prisoner free, but there were simply not enough of them to do it.

"Right. We'll have to put this in Bronwyn's hands. At least we've got some evidence to take with us —"

She had quite forgotten that Lily knew how to fight, and was quite ruthless. The dagger lashed out, the tip coming

within a hair's-breadth of Tara's throat. Brosca jerked Lily back, and slammed her hand down on the table to make her drop her weapon. Lily gasped, gathering breath to shout for help, and Catriona hit her again. The priest dropped to the floor, unconscious.

Tara blew out a blew, her eyes very, very wide at the near miss. "Well, that was fairly scary." Calming herself, she cast a sleep spell on Lily and the bound Templars. The Wardens moved around the room, gathering up what records they could carry.

While they worked, Brosca asked Catriona. "What's with you and the Chantry, anyway? Most humans like them all right."

Catriona sneered. "Or they pretend to because they're scared. I don't care any more. The Chantry good as killed my brother's wife."

"She was a mage?"

"She was having a baby," Catriona said, her voice caustic. "She was having a hard time, and my brother found an apostate to come and help her. Nobles can have court mages, but there's no real healing for common folk. Anyway, the apostate had her in hand and it looked like it was going to be all right. Then all of a sudden, this trio of Templars broke down the door and dragged the mage out. Dragged her out right as she was trying to deliver that baby. Killed her, for all I know. My brother begged them to let her finish, and they knocked him down. Knocked

me down, too. I kept yelling, "What the matter with you?" and my brother's kids were crying and terrified. The Templars didn't give a shit as long as they could round up an apostate. Anyway, we couldn't do anything. Polla died and the baby died, too. And when my brother applied to the Chantry for help, they turned him down because he was on their list of "mage sympathizers." Bastards. They can all go to Orlais... or the Void. I don't care which."

Tara agreed, but there was no time for more talk. She set fire to all the scrolls and codices that they could not take with them. When they were ashes, it was time to move on. "Let's get out of here."

With stealth, luck, and a great deal of patience, they managed to get back upstairs without a general alarm being raised. Two more templars were put to sleep, and the Wardens stepped out into the cold at last, with much to think about.

"The Boss'll shut them down," said Brosca. "She doesn't put up with crap like that."

Tara scowled. "Yes, Bronwyn will shut them down, but who's to say they won't set up shop somewhere else? It'll be days before we can get back to the Halt. I wish we could have cleaned the place out. " They walked on, snow crunching under their boots, and then Tara spoke again.

"One more thing. Don't tell Jowan about finding Lily. I may have to break it to him some day, but I'd rather he thought the Templars tortured her to death than have him know what she really was, and how she played him."

Bronwyn ruled her corner of the kingdom from a grubby stone chamber on a lower floor of Gherlen's Halt. She held court here on a regular basis, and more and more petitioners were finding their way to her: wanting justice in land disputes or family quarrels; wanting her to overrule their local landlords; wanting her opinion about the danger from darkspawn. Often they were simply there to gawk at Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer, or to make curious requests.

She had come west to fight, and so had not brought a great deal of luggage with her. The red dress given her by Teagan months before and some jewelry, including her ruby-studded diadem, were her only finery. Over the dress she wore a short capelet of black sable, fastened with her dragon brooch, which kept her warm in the chill of stone walls and floor. Such as she was, she seemed to satisfy her subjects. No one complained about her wearing the same gown, day after day. They wore the same clothes everyday themselves, and expected nothing more of their Queen than that her clothes should be finer than theirs.

When she held court, she had courtiers enough for a western outpost. A pair of knights, Ser Blayne Faraday and Ser Norrel Haglin; an elven bodyguard in Zevran and a dwarven one in Oghren; her court mages, Anders and Morrigan; and her court minstrel, Leliana. Others made their appearances from time to time: among them human swordsmen and archers; the mysterious Qunari giant, the

dignified Dalish, the raffish dwarven rogues, and the handsome young nobleman, Bann Alistair Fitzmaric, over whom all the girls of the country 'round sighed... even the ones who had never seen him for themselves. Above all, there was Scout, ever faithful and alert.

The request made by the fifth petitioner of the day took her a bit by surprise.

"We've come, my lady Queen..." a nervous shepherd croaked. "Me n' Aelflaed have come all the way from Darrowmouthe for you to put a good word on the baby."

Darrowmouthe was a tiny village not five miles away, where the Gherlen River flowed into Lake Calenhad. That said, it probably seemed a very great distance to the poor peasant and his very pregnant wife.

The young couple was gazing at her in hopeful reverence. Bronwyn felt herself blushing, heartily glad that her current Court did not contain the Grand Cleric. Anders leaned over her shoulder, hiding his grin.

"I think they're asking for a blessing," he whispered.

Morrigan murmured, "Oh, for pity's sake. Go on and touch the fool's belly and mumble a few words. Flemeth said that oft enough belief works as well as magic."

Leliana shifted restlessly, but did not openly object. Bronwyn sighed, and beckoned the young mother forward.

"Kneel," growled Ser Blayne.

Awkwardly, the girl knelt, all enormous eyes. Bronwyn leaned forward and lightly touched the distended abdomen.

"Maker turn his gaze on you, Aelflaed. May your child be a joy to you."

There was a ripple of awed whispers through the crowd at the audience. At Bronwyn's gesture, the husband came forward to help his wife to her feet.

"Our thanks, Lady Queen."

It was quite embarrassing.

And ironic, and more than a little painful as well. How could one who had lost her child have the power to bless another? The couple seemed comforted and reassured, however, and Bronwyn wished them well.

And now a deputation from another village was coming forward, not apparently to ask for anything, but to thank Bronwyn for her great condescension in allowing herself to be seen by her loyal subjects; and she was assured that there were none loyaler than the men before her. She suffered them to recite a perfectly awful poem about her deeds – some exaggerated, and some entirely fictional – and then was entreated to do them the honor of being present at their Wintersend celebration.

Bronwyn declined, citing her duties, but ordered that they be given ten kegs of the best ale to drink her health. From their manifest satisfaction, she wondered if that had been what they were angling for all along.

A few days later, word came that the young woman Aelflaed had given birth to a healthy little boy. As the couple's first two offspring had been stillborn, the credit

for the living child was attributed entirely to the power of their Queen. The Wardens chuckled over it, but only Mor-rigan had the nerve – or the gross insensitivity – to tell Bronwyn outright what people were saying.

There were only the five of them: three men and two dogs. They had started with Adam and Nathaniel but had quickly outpaced the main body of soldiery, and kept moving. They had camps to stay in part of the way: the Legion's camp at the mine in Amaranthine; then Kal'Hiro and Amgarrak. After that, they stuck to the empty Deep Roads as far as they could.

"It'll still be two more days until we reach Gherlen's Halt," Carver said, resigned to rough camping and cold rations.

"I just have this feeling that we need to get to Bronwyn as soon as we can," Jowan said, fidgeting nervously. "She needs to know that the embassy went well. She needs to know that the army's on the march. She might need us, too."

Fenris said nothing, but watched and listened. It had been a most interesting experience, this journey through the Deep Roads. An impressive feat, to clear them of dark-spawn. He had been introduced to Senior Warden Astrid, who was extremely busy organizing her... "thaigs" was the word. He had now seen golems with his own eyes, and they were rather more than impressive. He admitted a certain curiosity about Queen Bronwyn, too, and looked forward to seeing someone so admired. A hero, her people called her.

Well, he had seen King Loghain, who also had the name of a hero, and whose reputation had spread even as far north as Tevinter. He was more what Fenris pictured when hearing that word. A formidable man; an intimidating man; a man who had done great deeds in his time. But his were the deeds of man against man, not victories over inhuman monsters from time's abyss.

Carver's tawny mabari sniffed at him, as Fenris lay on his thin blanket, and then trotted away. Fenris would have thought the name "Magister" very unfortunate, except that Carver had told them that these dogs had been retrieved from a real magister's lair. The irony pleased Fenris. These were interesting creatures, too. Legend had it that the Tevinter magisters had bred them, and then the mabarais had rejected them, and defected in a body to the Fereldan barbarians. They were clever creatures, and the most unswerving of companions. Fenris was beginning to see why Fereldans generally held that dogs were better people than humans, elves, or dwarves.

On the twentieth of Guardian, Bronwyn awakened to a strange, persistent sound. She lay in bed, behind her heavy bed curtains, listening. A rustle? A clicking? It was impossible to guess the time in the darkness. She pushed the bed curtains aside, letting in the tentative grey light.

The noise she had heard was water dripping from the icicles hanging over the top of her window. Little rivulets

coursed down the panes. A dense white haze hung in the air, as if the skies had fallen, bringing the clouds down to earth. Sickening dread nearly undid her; then she gritted her teeth and rushed to the window, looking out at the melting snow through the fog. A great deal of it was already gone. Patches of earth lay raw and exposed. The courtyard was black with puddles that looked ankle-deep. She pushed open the window, shattering the remainder of the icicles. The mild air smelled of moist earth.

"No," she whispered, trying to make the weather otherwise by force of will. "No. It's too soon."

Scout, still half-asleep, opened one eye and lazily thumped his tail.

For his benefit, she tried to sound confident. "It's probably temporary. They have hard frosts here in the mountains as late as Cloudreach. Even if all the snow melts away, we could have a blizzard in Drakonis. We might. It's been known to happen."

The dog regarded her with compassionate brown eyes, got up, and stood close against her, sensing her anxiety. Absently, she rubbed his ears, her mind whirling with the variables.

Where was Loghain? Where was the rest of the army? They might not even have left Denerim yet. That thought was frightening, but she concentrated on calming her pounding heart. This comparatively warm weather might be a fluke. Cold air could blow in from the south later in the day. There was nothing to be done but wait and see. If she had thought



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it would do any good, she would have prayed to the Lady of the Skies to freeze all the world in solid ice, from the surface down to the very deepest of the Deep Roads.



SENIOR WARDEN MAGE FIONA



THE RED QUEEN

CHAPTER 2



WITH FIRE AND SWORD

MORNING, DRIPPING WET, AND FULL OF EXCITED INDIGNATION ABOUT THEIR ADVENTURES. Tara wanted reinforcements, and to be allowed to go back north and destroy the Templar stronghold. After hearing the report, Bronwyn was sympathetic, but unmoved. Tara persisted.

"Yes, I would like to clean out the Aeonar," Bronwyn finally said, exasperated. "But no, I can't right now!"

"I could do it with fifty soldiers!" Tara protested.

"Thirty," Brosca disagreed. "We only need thirty. They've got great stuff there, Boss."

"I daresay," Bronwyn said, sorting through the oddities spread out on her writing table. "What are these?"

"Sending stones, for sending messages."

"Do they work?"

"Er... no. Not really," Tara admitted. "I think they need some special elven magic... or something. If I had time to study them..."

"Time!" Bronwyn thumped one of the stones down. "Time is just what we *don't* have! Maybe you've noticed that the

snow is melting. Tara. An Orlesian army will be in Jader in less than ten days! The darkspawn could rise at any minute! However vile and despicable these Chantry folk are, they are not a priority. Besides," she blew out a breath. "Do you really want to start a war between the Wardens and the Chantry?"

Tara just looked at her. Brosca unsuccessfully tried to hide a grin.

"I'll take that as a yes," Bronwyn said dryly. "Not really a good plan at the moment. We have the darkspawn and the Imperial army to fight. I don't want every Templar in Ferelden feeling obligated to stab us in the back."

"They're torturing people, Bronwyn! They're experimenting with the Rite of Tranquility! They want to make perfect slaves!"

"And we'll stop them," Bronwyn said. "But later. Yes, I'm concerned about this, though it appears to me that this is not the Chantry per se, but a radical faction. I don't think that the Divine — or whoever is speaking for her these days — really wants to take on the dwarves."

For that was what the Tranquility experiments seemed to be directed toward: lyrium mining. In order to have a large labor force at their command, the Chantry would need to make Tranquil miners of non-mages, for there were simply not enough mages to make a go of the project. With sufficient miners, the Chantry could go into mining for themselves and cut out the dwarves entirely. Without the expense of purchasing lyrium from Orzammar, the Chantry would keep thousands — no, possibly millions — in gold for themselves. Their power, already

vast, would become irresistible. From the records, it looked like a number of important clergy were implicated to some degree, some of them thinking it was all for the greater good. Criminals, heretics, heathens would be made Tranquil. Instead of being executed, this "merciful alternative" would be instituted, and huge numbers of Tranquil would contribute to the glory of Andraste and her holy Chantry.

"At least you didn't kill anyone," said Bronwyn. "It's even possible they'll just regard it as Warden curiosity when faced with a suspicious hole in the ground."

"Maybe." Brosca was very amused. "Except that Tara made it sort of personal with Jowan's old girlfriend."

"Jowan's *what*?"

Tara shrugged. "There was this girl named Lily. She was an initiate at the Circle. She was the reason — well, part of the reason — that Jowan wanted to get away. She said she didn't want to be a priest. She was all 'Oh, Jowan, take me away from all this!' She and Jowan were going to go live on a farm."

"Oh, *really*?"

"Well, that's what he said at the time. And then he panicked and used blood magic, and then she was all, 'Ewww! Evil blood mage! Go away!' And Greagoir said she was going to the Aeonar, which makes me think that Greagoir was in on some of this, and I hope not the Tranquility bit. No. Probably not that. He's an old fart with a greatsword up his butt, but I don't think he'd go for Tranquilizing non-mages. I do think, though, that he knew



that Lily was a Chantry agent. Had to. She admitted she was trying to uncover a blood mage coven."

"Catriona slapped her face," Brosca said cheerily. "It was beautiful. We told her that Jowan had a new girl who was crazy about him." She saw Bronwyn's expression, and waved her hands. "Hey, Boss, it's true! That little dog he named after his old girlfriend is crazy about him. And she's a lot cuter than Chantry Girl."

Bronwyn laughed, "No doubt! Look, We can't go wandering off at the moment. The darkspawn may pop out of the ground anytime, anywhere. We've got to be ready to respond. The Orlesians are on their way, and the weather is going to speed their journey. Let me tell you about some plans I've been working on. I don't think the Aeonar is going anywhere anytime soon. We'll deal with them, I promise you, but later. If we live through this."

Tara made a face. "They're horrible people."

"How does that makes them different from everyone else we're fighting? Come here." Bronwyn took her friends by their shoulders and made them look out the window. "See the melting snow?"

"We walked through it the whole way, Boss," Brosca pointed out.

"Then you know that whatever is going to happen, will happen soon. Now this is what we're going to do..."



Other eyes noted the sudden change in the weather. It



was early in the year, of course, and there would no doubt be frost and snows, but perhaps the thaw would last long enough to allow a window of opportunity. The Empress gave commands: events were set in motion rather earlier than originally planned.

There was a great deal of activity in the Val Royeaux dockyard. While cautious captains advised against it, the Imperial Grand Admiral moved up the sailing date of his great fleet – and then had to revise it twice. Not having ever actually been a sailor himself, and owing his position to his noble birth, he was not fully aware of the effect of tides and currents on his ships, even when planning a comparatively short voyage, such as the one to Jader. Institutional inertia prevented hasty movement, but the Empress was so eager to launch her campaign that an advance of even a day pleased her.

It proved equally difficult to change the date of the army's departure. The Marquis Bohémond de Mauvoisin-en-Fermin, Lord of Jader, would march a day earlier, and was instructed to begin making his move through Gherlen's Pass as soon as he arrived in his city. He carried instructions for de Guesclin, the commander of Roc du Chevalier, and also for the Comtesse Coquelicot, the *gouvernante* of the Imperial Princesses at Chateau Solidor. The young ladies were to be moved east to Val Firmin, and from there to Mont-de-Glace, on the frigid shores of the Sundered Sea to the far south. Too many nobles would be on the Imperial Highway; too many who might



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want to abduct a princess with a claim to the throne.

A spectacular ball celebrated the commencement of Empress Celene's Grand Campaign against the Barbarians. The fairest and bravest from all parts of the empire gathered: bejeweled, bemasked, and bedight in white and gold, the Empress' personal colors. Fountains of wine played; hot-house rose petals drifted down on the company from silken nets attached to the ceiling. An orchestra of lutes, flutes, hautboys, harps, and drums played; the Imperial Choir, of young boys and girls chosen for beauty of voice and person, sang with ethereal delicacy throughout the event. During the midnight supper, professional dancers portrayed the great events of Orlesian history in exquisite mime.

No sight was more glorious than that of the Empress herself. Her hair was covered with a vast, silvery wig of finest shining spidersilk and surmounted by a fantastic diamond crown. Her skin was powdered into shimmering iridescence with mother-of pearl. She watched the entertainment, she dined, she danced, looking more like the image of a goddess than a living woman.

Near her sat her younger cousin, the Imperial Prince Florestan, as handsome as he was stupid. Regrettably, it appeared to Celene that she really might have to marry the buffoon herself. Making him her successor was tantamount to flushing the empire down a sewer, since he had no more political sense than a splendid horse. Her other successors were those odious daughters of her least favorite uncle, and



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Celene found the thought of any of *them* succeeding her distasteful. It appeared that she really might have to produce an infant herself. It was all very awkward and uncivilized, but so it was. Her only other option was to breed Florestan to one of the princesses, keep them locked up, and take possession of any subsequent children herself. Hmmm. Not a bad idea.

Florestan was a biddable lad of pure blood. He was still pouting a little about the loss of Prince Cousland's daughter. The silly boy had actually believed that the rumored union was real. Celene had sent him a consolation gift, which was even now on his lap: a little white pouf of a dog, whose collar spelled out the name "Blanchefleur." Obviously, no Imperial Princess could have been known by such a barbarous name as "Bronwyn." Had the girl actually come to Orlais, she would have been renamed as well as retrained. What an escape! Celene shuddered at the idea of such a person lumbering about her exquisite ball. Florestan apparently followed the Dragonslayer's career with interest, and made sentimental remarks to his most trusted friends, who of course reported them all to Celene.

Dragonslayer? Andraste's Champion? Celene would put paid to such nonsense, and quickly, too. The Divine was entirely of her mind — of course — after reading the absolute drivel sent to them by the doddering fool known as the Grand Cleric of Ferelden. At the ceremonial blessing of the troops tomorrow, certain individuals would be named anathema to the Chantry. The Grand Cleric was only one of many who



VAL ROYEAUX



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would be so condemned. Both she and the usurper Bronwyn would be burned in effigy in the square of the Grand Cathedral, a solemn symbol of their ultimate fate. Others would be pronounced anathema as well: the so-called King Loghain, the Arl of South Reach, and all the clergy and Templars present at the scandalous and impious Denerim conclave. The entire Fereldan Chantry would have to be purged and replaced. The Fereldan Circle of Magi, which had colluded in their actions, would be Annulled. Priests and Templars would march with the army to effect this. It was an Exalted March in substance, though it had been concluded that to declare it in so many words might be a political error.

The music swelled, unbearably rapturous. The Empress surveyed the grandeur of her event, her heart swelling with the music, but unable to smile or frown, lest she crack her painted façade.



Certain unfortunates were not invited to share in the splendor of the evening. Duke Prosper de Montfort, in disgrace since his return from Dog Land, was one such. He was packing for what promised to be an extended journey abroad.

"I'll take the books, too," he told his steward. "Yes. All of them. And all the honeywine of the year 18 vintage. If I must live in exile, it shall be a *comfortable* exile."

The thaw was welcome. If he was swift, he could be gone from Val Royeaux on the next tide, on his way to his little *pied-à-terre* on the edge of the Vimmark Mountains:



Chateau Haine. If he remained too long, the Empress was likely to change her mind; and instead of being forbidden to take part in her glorious campaign, he would be ordered to lead the vanguard, with those behind him ordered to see that he fell in service to the Empire.

The transcript of the Conclave he had brought with him had deeply offended the Empress. It had thus also deeply offended the Divine, who was quite beyond anything but repeating what the Empress told her to say. As for himself, he believed most of it, having met the redoubtable Dragon Queen for himself.

It was, unfortunately, quite impossible to say anything favorable about Queen Bronwyn to Her Imperial Majesty. Queen Bronwyn had committed the unforgivable affront of living when the Empress wanted her dead; of succeeding when the Empress wished her to fail. And now the girl was married to Loghain Mac Tir, whom the Empress detested even more than the King of Nevarra.

Prosper accepted that for the foreseeable future, he was *persona non grata* in Orlais.

He would leave tomorrow, on the evening tide. In the afternoon, there was a spectacle that he could not bear to miss. The Empress meant to make a gala entertainment of her enemies. Prosper would not have a place in the seats of honor, but for once he could stand with the rabble. He might even have a better view that way...



The weather that following noon was a disappointment to the organizers of the event. While it continued unseasonably warm, the sky was grey with clouds. Melting snow and ice filled the streets and courts with filthy puddles. The Empress had hoped for blazing sun: a proper omen when her army should march down the Avenue of the Sun, through the Sun Gates, and on to victory.

Well, they would have to make do with what they had. In the broad square in front of the Grand Cathedral, anathema would be pronounced on the enemies of Orlais and the Chantry. A procession was already wending through the streets, with the effigies of the criminals carried on litters. From the distance came the clangor of trumpets and drums heralding their passage, accompanied by ranks of priests bearing censers and Templars bearing swords. Everything proclaimed the solemnity of the occasion. From the sounds, the procession was ascending the hill from the Market District, and approaching the gates piercing the walls of the sprawling cathedral compound.

Up on the steps of the Cathedral, framed by the soaring twin bell towers, sat the Empress and the Divine, each on a golden throne. Behind them was the Cathedral Choir, in full warble. Before them were the stakes and piles of wood for the ritual burning. Ranged around the square were the favored chevaliers and units of the Imperial Guard. The surging, excited mob permitted to witness this event—and they must witness it, in order to spread the word—

would prove no danger to her, protected as she was.

Duke Prosper was disguised by a plain hooded cloak and an old, unfashionable mask that had been his maternal grandfather's. He was not the only masked figure among the crowd. Poor nobles, well-to-do merchants and their women, and servants masked in the livery of their masters were among the people today. There were also, no doubt, foreign spies, bards, and cutpurses. Prosper himself had been cautious. Anyone trying to take his coin would have to cut all the way through his clothes to the heavy leather belt around his waist. And for that matter, the coins were on the inside.

Ah! Here were the effigies, the high litters holding them aloft for all to see. The Grand Cleric Muirin's effigy was more generic: a stuffed woman with grey hair and a priest's habit, covered with the loose yellow robe and pointed yellow hat of the condemned heretic. Her name and a list of her crimes was written on a placard, and hung around her neck.

Queen Bronwyn's effigy was far more interesting, and owed quite a bit to his own eye-witness reports. It was dressed in a curious imitation of her red Dragon Armor, the fame of which had spread even into Orlais. Fastened to her right hand was a wooden sword, painted silver. The arm swung free, in a mockery of swordplay. Her eyes were huge and painted a bright, bright green, giving her a demonic aspect. She too, was wrapped in the loose

yellow robe of the condemned, and a yellow pointed hat of shame was pinned to the long dark hair. On the litter was the effigy of her dog, which would be burned with her.

The music reached a climax and ended with a crash, as the procession filed into position in front of the enthroned figures on high. The people cheered the entertainment. The Divine was too feeble to perform the next part of the ceremony, and so that was delegated to the Grand Cleric of Orlais, a fairly young woman, who bowed low to the thrones, and then stepped forward, ready to read from a long beribboned scroll.

A gust of wind flickered across the square, catching the trailing parchment and twisting it almost out of the priest's grasp. Another priest came forward to straighten the document. After some fumbling, the woman began reading.

"Your Perfection, Your Imperial Majesty, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen, brothers and sisters of the Chantry, and all the faithful of Andraste, hear me!

"On this twenty-second day of Pluitanis, in the thirty-first year of the Dragon Age, let the will of the Maker be known! The Chantry, with loving sorrow, today cuts off sinful members from the body of the faithful.

"The so-called Queen of Ferelden, by name Bronwyn Cousland, and the former Grand Cleric of Ferelden, by name Muirin, are declared heretics in thought, word, and deed, for they have conspired with maleficar, and led the foolish and ignorant into grave error. They are

proclaimed anathema, by the inspired command of Her Perfection, Beatrix III."

The wind picked up. The lengthy parchment flapped noisily. A few onlookers pulled their cloaks closer about them. In the southwest, dark clouds boiled up from the horizon. Prosper thought he smelled rain. The Grand Cleric raised her voice, shouting in her attempt to make herself heard.

"And thus, by her authority, granted unto her by the Maker himself, by our Blessed Lady Andraste, and by all the holy disciples that followed her in times past, we excommunicate and anathematize them from the faithful congregation of the Maker's Chantry. We condemn them, that they may be tormented, disposed, and delivered over to the righteous punishment deserved by the apostate, the heretic, and the maleficar. May they be cursed, even to the Void, and let them wander the edges of the outer darkness both now and forever more.

"May they be cursed wherever they may be, whether in the house or in the alley, in the woods or in the water, or in the Chantry!

The priests and Templars shouted out the response.

"May they be cursed!"

The priest continued, "May they be cursed in living and dying! May they be cursed in eating and drinking, in being hungry, in being thirsty, in fasting and sleeping, in slumbering, and in sitting, in living, in working, in resting, in praying, and in war."

"May they be cursed!"

"May they be cursed in all the faculties of their bodies! May they be cursed inwardly and outwardly! May he be damned in their mouths, in their breasts, in their hearts, and in all their appurtenances, down to their very bowels!"

"May they be cursed!"

A brief whirlwind swept through the courtyard, catching at hoods and veils. A silk scarf of bright scarlet was snatched from a noblewoman, and flew through the air like a gout of blood. The effigies rocked on their supports. Queen Bronwyn's sword arm rose and fell, the wooden sword laying about her with a a furious clatter. A few drops began sprinkling down on the assemblage. The Divine winced as the wind tugged at her sparkling head-dress. The Grand Cleric was nearly screaming now.

"And may the Maker, with all his power, rise up against them, and crush them utterly!"

"May they be cursed!"

"And let none of the faithful offer them friendship or succor, nor offer them shelter or sustenance, for to do so will be to suffer anathema in their turn!"

"May they be cursed!"

The chorus of priests and Templars had become a bit ragged. The censers were creating a great deal of smoke, and people were coughing, covering their mouths and noses.

Prosper glanced at the Empress and saw that something was wrong. She was blinking rapidly, and had actually

put her hand up to her face. If she were not careful, she would smudge her cosmetics. Perhaps something – a bit of grit or dust had got into her eye. The rain was increasing, dampening the plumes of the chevaliers. The Grand Cleric's voice cracked. She cleared it, and shouted the more.

"Let it be known that to slay them is no sin, but rather an act of worship pleasing to the Maker, for he who slays a heretic gains great reward!"

"May they be cursed!"

Definitely ragged now. Even the priests were looking up uneasily at the sky. Flashes in the approaching black clouds portended a great storm. The Grand Cleric lost control of her scroll, and a pair of initiates had to chase after it, and then laboriously roll it up and find the right place again. The crowd grew restless, thinking about wine and hot soup at home. The troops were grim, profoundly displeased at the prospect of marching out of the city in the rain.

"So let it be, in the name of the Maker and our most holy Andraste, this day. And let these simulacrum be destroyed in the eyes of the righteous, as the heretics will be destroyed in both body and soul in the eyes of the Maker!"

Then she began reading a long list of those condemned for conduct "counter to the teachings and spirit of our Maker and his holy Chantry," which began with "Loghain Mac Tir, so-called King of Ferelden, Knight-Commander Greagoir, Anora the Dowager Queen," and which went on for some time, listing most of the Fereldan nobility and clergy. As a

less serious crime, it did not carry a penalty of death, but only loss of all titles, confiscation of all property, and relegation to a monastery or convent of the Divine's choice for life. The list of names went on and on, and the crowd grew restless and bored. Some began slipping away. The Grand Cleric noted that she was losing the people's interest, and sped up her reading, wanting to get to the most colorful event. She finally read off the last names: Sisters Rose and Justine of the Denerim Chantry, and signaled for a trumpet call. That earned her renewed attention.

"Executioners! Do your duty!" she ordered.

The executioners set about untying the effigies from the litters, so they could be taken down and fastened to the stakes. Wind tugged at the figures, and the yellow pointed hats tore loose from their pins and whirled away. One was deposited at the feet of the Divine. Her attendants hastily gathered it up. There was a stir and a rising murmur. An executioner was buffeted by a blow from Queen Bronwyn's wooden sword, and knocked down.

Prosper grimaced with disgust, glad he was not a heathen of old, for if he had cared for omens, he might have advised the Empress that this day was unlucky, and they should all think again. For that matter, he was very, very glad that he was not the courtier who had planned this fiasco.

The wind ripped off the flimsy penitent's robes. and wafted them across the square all the way to the walls, leaving the images of a priest in holy garments and a queen in her armor.

Some Templars came forward and lent their aid, clumsily lashing the effigies to the stakes in the teeth of a gale.

"Stop! Stop this!"

Prosper could have sworn he heard someone shout this. In a moment he was certain, for others were taking up the cry, frightened at the manifest displeasure of the heavens.

"Stop! Stop!"

The Empress did not frown — because Celene knew that made wrinkles. However, she gave a quick, peremptory gesture to hurry the the process. One of the executioners lifted a torch fueled with pitch and swamp oil, and prepared to set alight the artistically constructed pile of wood at the feet of Muirin's effigy. A low rumble of thunder echoed off the stones, alarming the crowd. More flashes illuminated the storm clouds.

The wind changed direction; the executioner turned his head to evade the smoke and flames of his own torch. He set fire to the oily-soaked tinder, and it blazed up luridly, fanned by the wind. Bits of burning straw flew into the screaming crowd, or swept up into the darkening sky in a dance of glittering sparks.

The other executioner thrust his own torch into the pile under the effigy of Queen Bronwyn.

And the heavens replied.



The bolt of lightning that struck the Grand Cathedral's east tower was so sudden and brilliant that people did not

see it so much as they were momentarily struck blind. The simultaneous crack of thunder, coupled with the roar of the splintered stones as they tumbled, had people clutching their ears against the excruciating pain.

Broken masonry rained down, and was followed immediately by the skies opening, and releasing a downpour that only added to the rising panic. Twelve members of the Cathedral Choir were killed by falling masonry. The Duke and Duchess of Lydes and their servants were crushed by the great bell, bigger than an ogre, which crashed to the pavement and rolled down the Cathedral steps, tolling the doom of those in its path. Other bells, smaller and high-pitched, fell in its wake, bouncing along the walls, ringing out a sweet and terrible music.

A few kept their heads. A pair of quick-witted chevaliers shepherded the Empress and some of her ladies to the safety of the convent on the west side of the compound. Templars made a cordon around the dumbstruck Divine, and one bold man carried her in his arms into the Chapel of the Disciple Havard.

The terrified crowd rushed the gates of the walled compound, the strong trampling the weak. Mothers with babes in arms were knocked down; the old were slammed to the stones or battered against the walls. The gates were too narrow for the press, and a frenzied din rose up, as some officers vainly tried to create order out of chaos. Shrieks, curses, wails, groans, the screams of horses: the

noise was beyond belief, and spilled blood spread out on the pavement, mixed with the pitiless rain.

Duke Prosper had the sense not to try for the gates. Instead, he had dodged back, and managed to squeeze past the mob and onto one of the staircases leading up to the guards' walkway at the top of the compound wall.

He was not the only one who had that idea, but they were few enough to succeed. The guards' were too shocked themselves to challenge the presence of those who stood with them in the awful onslaught of the storm, watching the disaster unfold.

The east tower was so compromised that it was crumbling piecemeal, huge stones and great statues collapsing and shattering as they struck the ground below. Huddled, sodden shapes lay still in the wide square, or twitched in agony. Some people darted out, trying to help the injured; others to steal their valuables. A lady, pinned under masonry, had her gold earrings ripped from her ears and her jeweled mask torn from her face. Children wandered aimlessly, crying for their parents.

Another bolt of lightning struck the Cathedral, this time hitting the gilded sunburst above the huge double doors at the front. It toppled, taking the image of Archon Hessarian with it.

Brooding over the courtyard, the effigies, too drenched to burn, were unharmed, even as the oil pooled at the bottom of the wood was consumed in a sullen haze.

And just as suddenly as the downpour had begun, it ended, leaving the survivors to deal with the consequences. The black clouds passed overhead on their way north, spitting spikes of lightning as they departed. The darkness lifted somewhat, but that did not improve the prospect. People pointed at the horror at the gates. Some pressed their hands over their mouths; some wept. Prosper was not going waste time in useless pity. He glanced briefly at the piled, twisted bodies, and then turned his eyes away.

Instead, he reached under his cloak, hiked up his doublet, and retrieved enough gold for the guards to oblige him by lowering him from the walls in a supply basket attached to pulleys and a rope. Others pleaded to be allowed to go with him, but the basket was small. He closed his ears to misery, and stumbled out of the basket, tripping unceremoniously in a mud puddle. Picking himself up, he counted himself lucky. If his ship was still afloat, he was leaving as soon as he reached the harbor. The Empress would be looking for someone to blame for spoiling her gala entertainment, even though it was clearly an act of the Maker himself.

"We can't wait for the Orlesians to attack, Your Majesty," Ser Norrel growled. "You let them have the first move, and they're likely to crush us! Why let them dictate the terms of battle? Hit them first and hit them hard!"

There were grunts of agreement around the table. Bronwyn smiled thinly, wondering if Ser Norrel had given

exactly this advice to Rendon Howe when he was planning to attack Highever. Probably. It rather prejudiced Bronwyn against him, though in her heart she knew he was making perfect sense.

Bronwyn decided she must take them into her confidence, and quickly. She looked around the table, knowing that in the end that any decision would be her responsibility. Alistair, of course, sat in council with them as a nobleman, a Warden, and a trusted friend. Unfortunately, his response was always to express perfect faith in Bronwyn's judgment.

"Whatever you decide is fine with me!"

Not very helpful, though well meant, she sighed to herself.

Ser Blayne liked and trusted Ser Norrel, and furthermore felt obligated to him for saving the day back in Harvestmere when the Orlesians attacked under the guise of a mercenary band. It had been an opportunistic probe; one that could well have resulted in the seizure of this vital outpost. He, too, was very much in favor of a preemptive strike.

Ser Norrel had more to say.

"I know you want to do the right thing, Your Majesty. I know you'd like the Orlesians to plainly put themselves in the wrong by attacking first. But by the Maker! They already have, even though by stealth and in disguise. I've fought them since I was a boy, and I learned that Orlesians have no shame. They have no shame," he repeated. "They don't care what anyone thinks of them, because they think we're all dogs under their feet. No offense," he rumbled, with

a respectful nod at Scout. "But the truth's the truth. And for that matter, what do we ourselves care what anybody thinks? The Nevarrans are likely to thank us. The Marchers won't care if we kill a hundred thousand Orlesians — any more than they'd care if the Orlesians killed a hundred thousand Fereldans. Did anybody come to our aid back in the Blessed Age? No. To the Void with them, I say! Your only duty is to do what's right for your own kingdom."

He irritated her almost beyond bearing, but that did not mean that what he said was wrong.

She ran her fingers lightly over the rough wood of the desk, thinking.

"It's true," she said, feeling her way through her words. "It's true that the Orlesians are coming. It's also true that we should do something to knock them off balance. I've already set some things in motion to give them a surprise. However, I don't want to reveal my hand too soon. If we fire the dockyards, the invasion fleet will simply go somewhere else where we are not so well prepared."

"All right, then!" said Ser Norrel, relieved that he was getting somewhere with the girl. He hated having to deal with high-minded sorts. Their ideals only got their soldiers killed. "It's not so much a matter of 'if,' as 'when.' By all means, let the fleet sail into port and burn the ships and the docks together."

"You've already made plans?" Ser Blayne asked.

"Yes," Bronwyn answered. "I have people who will be in

a position to destroy the Orlesian fleet — or that part of it that arrives in Jader. I agree that we cannot delay. It would be better if we had a great fleet of our own to set fire to the ships at sea and sink them with the troops they carry, but there is no such fleet. We must let the Orlesians dock, which means that much of what they carry will unload. That is why we will also have to fire the barracks the same night."

Ser Norrel eyes lit up like a child's at Satinalia. "What can my men do to help?"

"You will distract the Orlesians," she said. "They will be so concerned about what is happening here in Gherlen's Pass that they will not be expecting an attack on Jader itself."

Rendon Howe's man, for the first time, was feeling very pleased about his change of commanders.

"Distract them? How?"

"We are going to take the Rock."

The moon had shrunk down to the last waning crescent, and its light would not betray them. The advance party moved quickly from the west through the hills, out of the Deep Roads opening near Solidor. They came, knowing every inch of the fortress ahead; every postern, every sally port, every guard watch. They knew the location of the commander's office and personal quarters; they knew the location of the guard posts and the armory. All this had been scouted out over the past month by the best spies any army could have: spies who could not be detected. A few of the Avvars knew about Morri-

gan and Anders' shape-shifting abilities, but they were loyal and close-mouthed, and most soldiers would have put such talk down to heathen superstition, anyway. And the Avvars were going in with the advance party.

The dwarves were a delicate problem. They were allies of the Wardens, not of the Ferelden Crown; and King Bhelen was not in a state of war with either Orlais or the Chantry. Indeed, the Chantry was possibly Orzammar's most important trading partner. Thus, the dwarves were posted in the Deep Roads for the duration of the operation against Roc du Chevalier. She needed, for the sake of decency, to send some Wardens with them. She had decided on Leliana, who might have scruples about making war on a country she loved, and with her sent Shale, Asa, and Ulfa as support.

No one else at the Halt was so particular. The Dalish were allies of the Wardens, true; but it was Queen Bronwyn, as sovereign of Ferelden, who had granted them a homeland. And they were perfectly happy to fight both Orlais and the Chantry, as long as there was any chance of winning and living through it. Old grievances ran deep in Dalish blood.

The attack's strategy had been planned meticulously. Tactically, however, it was going to be executed very quickly, to avoid losing the element of surprise. The troops were marshaled or deployed on various pretexts, and would be formed up in the dark after supper. The infiltrators must seize the inner keep and the armory, and they must open the gates.

Bronwyn and her people would head for the inner keep; Tara would lead the force against the gates. When the gates were theirs, she would signal – two fireballs into the sky in quick succession – and the main assault would dash across the empty no-man's land, led by Alistair and the knights. The inner defenses of the Rock were formidable, but if key places were invested, it would all be over but the slaughter. The Rock was indeed nearly impregnable against a conventional assault. What Bronwyn had planned was far from ordinary. The Rock had no real defenses against magical attack, because no army – except the Tevinters and the Qunari, both in the far north – used magic.

Nor were there Templars at the Rock. Anders had made sure there was no mistake about that. No one should be able to sense their magic until it was much too late. They knew the guard schedules. Morrigan had flown up and down repeatedly along the stretch of wall they would climb, memorizing it, and describing it to Bronwyn. There was a low turret to the southwest that was their target. A parapet would be accessible to good climbers. It was not exactly a blind spot, because the Rock was too well-designed to have a real blind spot, but the guard on the parapet would be dealt with first, and in the darkness, no guards posted elsewhere would be able to see them climbing up the wall.

Best of all, no one would hear the clatter of a grappling hook. Not when mages could shape shift into birds, and fly up to the parapet with lengths of strong, light spider-silk rope.

Not when they could resume human form and tie the knotted ropes together and to the iron bars conveniently already in place. Bronwyn, a map of the fortress firmly in her head, planned to be up that rope, and surprising the Commander in his bed before the guards changed at midnight.

It was a dark, silent march through the hills. They passed Chateau Solidor, a pale complex of towers to the north. Weapons and armor were muffled to prevent tell-tale clanking. A few soldiers stumbled and fell. No one was hurt; and if they were, Anders was flitting along with them, ready to help as needed. A few wolves howled in the distance, but did not challenge the fifty picked troops moving toward the Rock.

Their destination lay ahead, its bulk silhouetted against the starlight. Eventually they reached the Imperial Highway, and crossed it by twos and threes, slipping into the welcome blackness of the north side. When they were all gathered once more, Bronwyn led them on until they reached the limits of cover.

The snowmelt was their friend. Instead of contrasting against white, they blended with the sodden earth. The only danger was the squelching when they stepped into thick mud. They slowed, pulling their feet up carefully, lest they be betrayed by the sucking noise.

A formidable ditch surrounded the Roc, but it had little water in it. Crossing it was a hazardous, chancy business,

but this, too had been scouted. Once everyone was gathered at the base of the wall, it was time for their shape-shifters to do their part. Morrigan and Anders changed and fluttered up, disappearing from sight. After a dreadful wait, they returned, calm and unruffled.

"We took care of the guard," Anders whispered. "Now give us the ropes."

This took even more time, since while the rope itself was very light, the length involved made it too heavy for even large birds to carry up all at once. Metal clamps would hold sections of the ropes together. The birds carried their burdens up, once, twice, thrice. The rope snaked down to them, and the end was grabbed and clamped down.

Everything they dared leave was left there. Bronwyn deposited her helmet with the rest of the excess baggage, and gripped the rope.

Tara touched her arm, and whispered. "Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Good luck."

Tara, of course, was simply not strong enough to make the climb herself, but her fighting skills and reliability were essential to the plan. Instead, Ostap would carry her on his back, fastened to him with a harness. For that matter, neither Niall nor Petra could have made the climb, either; and they weighed a great deal more than the slender little elf.

Climbing up a sheer wall was no joke, but it was also not the worst climb Bronwyn had ever undertaken. The



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ascent of the Tower of Ishal in a the midst of lightning and rain was forever her standard for misery. This still had its unpleasant moments: slick spots along the stones, where the sunlight had not yet melted the ice; getting over the parapet wall without making an unearthly racket; waiting for her brave companions to follow her. The dead guard was shoved to one side, making room for the living.

It seemed to take hours, since only five could be on the rope at a time. She watched the horizon anxiously, wishing that the moon might forget to rise tonight. When Tara and Ostap reached the parapet, Bronwyn and Bustrum leaned over to help haul them up and unfasten the harness.

No one fell. The worst injury was a pinched finger. Bronwyn fixed the plan of the Rock in her mind again, and opened the door to the staircase that would take them down to the main north-south hall of the Rock.

She drew her sword with a soft hiss of dragonbone, and went to pay a call on Berthold de Guesclin.

Two sentries were unfortunate enough to be on duty. They were mowed down, and shortly thereafter the invaders parted ways. Bronwyn continued on to the commander's quarters and the armory, and Tara to the main gate.

The gate was important; not just because it would admit the main body of the Fereldan soldiery, but because the great horn for the general alarm was located there in the outer courtyard. If they could secure the area, it would be extremely difficult to rouse the castle's defenders. Tara



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and Brosca, an unstoppable team, led the charge. They passed through some reception rooms and moved perpendicular to the quarters of some of the lower-ranking officers. Quiet as they were, they were still making noise.

One enterprising Orlesian opened his door, stared out, and then hastily tried to shut it again. A surging mass of people carrying edged weapons shoved the door open and there was a short, messy fight in the cramped chamber. The Orlesian lived long enough to shout for help, and within a few moment, the entire corridor was a battlefield, with half-naked Orlesians bursting through doors, swords in hands, ready to fight to the death. A bitter, ugly fight followed, with casualties on both sides.

One of the defenders tried to run, hoping to alert the commander. Brosca brought him down with a thrown dagger.

"Come on!" cried Tara. "We've got to get to the gates!"

They ran on, past the chapel, past the upper servants' quarters. A few people heard the noise of running soldiers, and dismissed it as normal. The corridor opened out and after a frightening moment of disorientation, Tara spotted the door that led to the walkway around the gatehouse. This was going to be rough. There were always guards in the outer courtyard.

They did not shout; they gave no warning. The door opened, and quite suddenly the guards saw soldiers running their way, whom, after a moment's bewilderment, they understood were not Orlesian. One man raised a shout.

"We are betrayed! Sound the alarm!"



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Tara froze him in place, and Darach put an arrow through his eye. Screams rose up.

Brosca peeled off, heading to the long bronze horn at the angle of the walkway. Bustrum and Soren followed, spotting the Orlesians who were running toward the same goal. They crashed into each other, bodies flying. Bustrum grabbed one of the men, and flung him, headfirst, down into the courtyard. A wild yell was punctuated with a crunch.

Ostap, Quinn, and Maeve fought their way to the gate gears. Maeve tried to move the control lever and could not. She threw her whole weight into her push, and then shouted, "Quinn! Give me a hand!"

The boy bashed an Orlesian skull with the pommel of his greatsword, and then flung his weapon down to help Maeve. With a grinding, and a clanking, the bars began moving and the gate slowly cracked open.

Soldiers burst out of the courtyard barracks, bellowing curses. Archers fired down into the mass of them, but the Orlesians had archers, too; archers who sensibly sheltered behind doorways and targeted the figures up on the walkway. Tara, running for the parapet above the gate, was knocked backwards by Darach. She looked again, and saw that he had caught an arrow with his left hand – one that would have gone through her throat in another split second. She gave him a grin and ran on. The gate was rising more swiftly now: it was high enough.

Another arrow scraped her ear as it flashed by. Tara



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shrieked with the sting and the fright, but managed to shoot a blazing fireball up into the night sky. A roar, and she was struck from behind and slammed to the stones. A brawny, gauntleted arm was around her throat, trying to snap her neck. Feet trampled about, and one stepped on her hand. Darach was shouting above her, and the massive, sweat-stinking weight on her back went limp.

"Get him off me!" she wheezed. "I can't breathe!"

The corpse was dragged away and Tara rolled over. She grasped Spellweaver, and flat on her back she shot the second fireball skywards.



Aeron was perched on the gatehouse of Gherlen's Halt waiting for a signal, while the puzzled troops below fidgeted in their ranks. Only a few torches burned in the main courtyard, as the commanders watched and waited. Everyone knew by now that something big was about to happen. Adaia and Siofranni held hands in a moment of unity. Oghren fingered his axblade, chuckling in anticipation. Sten was silent and impassive, rather looking forward to a battle on such a scale. It would be extremely interesting to see the inside of an Orlesian fortress. They had long been the power in southern Thedas. Such a structure would fall easily to Qunari cannon. These less civilized folk had no such weapons, but guile and audacity might well bring victory. That and very careful planning.

A fireball lit the sky over Roc du Chevalier. After a long moment, it was followed by another.



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"The signal!" bellowed Aeron. "The signal!"

"Open the gates," shouted Ser Blayne. "No noise, men! No talking! Follow me – at the double!"

The crescent moon was about to rise. Golden light spilled over the horizon. There was no time to waste. Dark shapes flitted over the landscape like phantoms: running, running, running toward the Rock. In any other battle, they would have raised a rousing battle cry. Tonight they ran in silence, grimly purposeful. A human might not be as fast as a horse, but he – or she – could run far more quietly.

Alistair ran with them, a dog on either side. Scout, of course, could not climb stone walls, and so Bronwyn had ordered him to fight with Alistair and Scrapper. The older mabari was not pleased, but liked the human well enough. The pup was young for this, but Scout would teach him the ways of battle – no one better.

Niall and Petra had fallen a little behind. They were far more fit than they had been when they had traveled to Ostagar so many months ago, but they were not on the level of a trained warrior. Petra puffed a little, reflecting on how much regular exercise Grey Wardens got. She stumbled over the dark, uneven ground, and Emrys put out his hand to steady her. They ran on, the opening gate growing larger at every stride.



In the inner Keep, Bronwyn was determined to behead the command center as quickly as possible. She led the way



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through the maze of corridors, meeting any resistance with such ferocity that nothing long withstood her. At this hour of the night, few guards were up and about. None were outside the armory, which was locked. The key was in the Commander's possession, and with luck, would soon be in Bronwyn's.

They neared the Commander's door. Bronwyn peered around the corner and saw two drowsy guards posted in front of it. She turned to Anders and Morrigan and mouthed the word, "two," at them, illustrating with a gesture. The two mages nodded to each other and stepped silently out into the hall. Each paralyzed a guard into immobility. Bronwyn dashed out, Aveline at her side, ready to kill them, but the sight of the young Orlesians' terrified, helpless faces stayed her hand. Killing them was tantamount to killing unarmed men... to killing old people or children. She waved Ostap and Bustrum forward and murmured a command to take the guards away, bind them, and gag them.

Once the guards were out of the way, she tried the door. It was locked. She then knocked. Anders looked like he would burst out laughing. Morrigan merely raised her brows.

De Guesclin sounded sleepy. And angry.

"What is it?"

"Monseigneur," Bronwyn said respectfully, in her purest accent. "An important message."

A muttered curse. "Nonsense," said de Guesclin, as he turned the lock. "What message?"

Half-naked, and warm from his bed, he opened the



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door, and stared thunderstruck at the sight of Bronwyn. She slammed the hilt of her sword into his jaw.

"The Rock," she hissed, "is mine. That's the message."

De Guesclin fell back, grunting, but lashed out with a bare foot, trying to trip her. He failed, because Bronwyn was moving already. The Orlesian was frozen in mid-stumble, and then tied to his chair. Bronwyn was congratulating herself on an easy capture when a shrieking, naked elf girl burst out through the bed curtains onto her back, and tried to stab her with a tiny dagger.

The dagger could not penetrate Bronwyn's armor, but it certainly could have cut into unprotected skin. Luckily, Zevran grabbed the girl, and pulled her away, as she kicked and cursed. He laid his knife to her throat, and de Guesclin, shaking off his stupor, cried out, "No! Don't kill her!"

Zevran looked at Bronwyn, who shrugged.

"She'd better drop the dagger and sit down."

De Guesclin's face was a mask of distress. "Mariel! It is useless!"

The girl went slack in Zevran's arms, and promptly burst into tears. Zevran let her go, wary and watchful.

"Sit," Bronwyn ordered.

The girl grimaced, but did as she was bid.

Cathair looked down at her in deep disapproval. "You.. an elf... whore yourself to a shemlen?"

The girl made a quick, rude gesture. "What business is it of yours, painted savage? He is a better man than you!"

A chuckle ran around the room.



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"I like her," Zevran remarked.

"So do I." Bronwyn laughed. "I'd make her a Warden, if I didn't think she'd try to knife us in our sleep. Tie her up."

"Here are the keys," said Aveline, rifling de Guesclin's desk.

"This is an act of war!" growled the Orlesian.

"— and the Empress will hear of this outrage," agreed Bronwyn, nodding. "And so forth. The Empress has been making war on me for months. It's time the tables were turned. We'll be back to see to the terms of your imprisonment later. Meanwhile, I have a fortress to secure."



The battle in the courtyard was hot and bloody. The Orlesians were holding their own until a wave of Fereldans crashed through the gateway, ready for a fight and eager for revenge.

Scout reared up, snapping in an Orlesian's face, knocking the man down for Alistair to stab. Seeing that humans had this situation in order, he headed off to find his Bronwyn. She was not far, but he needed to be with her. Scrapper yipped in confusion, but was ordered to stay with Alistair. Scout could do what needed to be done more easily without a puppy trailing behind him.

He trotted up a corridor, ahead of the battle. An Orlesian shouted at the sight of him and ran forward. Scout turned in the man's direction, considering.

A few minutes later, he was continuing on his way, licking the blood from his jaws.



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The dog soon found himself in a room with a lot of strangers trying to hold a gate. A crowd of men were pushing timbers against the gates to bolster them. Bronwyn was on the other side, and her people were slamming something hard against the straining barrier. The situation was untenable. Without giving them a growl of warning, Scout leaped at the man at the back of the defenders. The man screamed as powerful jaws met in his thigh, and he dropped his end of the timber. Distracted, the rest of the men turned and saw their friend screaming and blood streaming from his torn leg. An axe smashed through the gate, and with a loud "Hurrah!" the gate gave way, with Bronwyn in the lead, her big sword cutting through enemy flesh. Scout barked happily, and released the current victim. There were many more to fight.



Once the two Fereldan forces met — once they surged throughout the fortress — once the surprised, sleepy, and outnumbered officers had surrendered — well, it was largely all over. Roc du Chevalier was theirs, but not without some loss.

Bronwyn stood in the courtyard in the thin light before dawn, her crimson armor dripping with the blood of unlucky foes, holding the Keening Blade on high, while they cheered her. It was a great moment for Ferelden: an historic moment. Roc du Chevalier had long been a symbol of the Orlesian threat, and now it was theirs... forever, perhaps, if they could hold it. The attack had been a bril-



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liant success. The soldiers bellowed their "Hurrahs!" and a contingent of northerners raised the Highever salute.

"Highever Hail to Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden!"

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

The repeated roars of love, of approval, of loyalty, lifted Bronwyn's spirits like wings — like the blood-red wings of a mighty dragon. Her friends surrounded her, glad in their turn, proud of their accomplishment, pleased at their own daring. Alistair was grinning at her, a more quietly pleased Emrys at his side. The mages were already bending over the hurt and injured. Adaia, beaming, reeking of explosive chemicals, was whispering to Danith. Oghren was draining the flask he always carried. Maeve and Quinn were hugging each other, glad to be alive. Zevran was kissing Tara's dirty hand. Bronwyn looked for each and every one of her Wardens. They were all alive, though some had been badly wounded.

She thought of Loghain's secret map; his cherished dream of Ferelden's proper borders, and she wondered if they might be more than a dream, one day.

Very likely they would never be so lucky again, for it was inevitable that word would leak out about how it had been accomplished. While the climbing force was sworn to secrecy about the way from the Deep Roads near Chateau Solidor, someone was bound to tell about their shape-shifters. The news might not spread quickly, but spread it would. She put the thought aside. This was a time for rejoicing.

"Now," she shouted, when the cheers died down. "Let's wash off the blood, see to the wounded, and have a good breakfast!"



SER SILAS CORTHWAITE, TEMPLAR

CHAPTER 3



SPOILS
OF WAR

ROC DU CHEVALIER

WAS A TREASURE HOUSE. It was immense, first of all, and it was full of... stuff.

Even after the Fereldans called themselves victorious, the work was far from done. The prisoners were disarmed and locked in the extensive dungeons. Chevaliers offered their parole, but Bronwyn had no time to deal with them. They, too, were disarmed and locked away.

Bronwyn's troops searched carefully through the fortress, finding locked rooms, routing out hidden opposition, dealing with the last stands of brave men who would not surrender, and accepting the swords of those who would. There were frightened servants, mostly elves, who feared that the fall of Rock was their own death warrant. These were rounded up, and assured that the terrible Dragon Queen needed maids and cooks just as much as the chevaliers ever had. Some of the servants were sullen; more seemed hopeful. They must be watched, of course, since there might be bards and spies among them. Soldiers were posted throughout the castle.

Bronwyn, busy in the outer courtyard, commanded all this, but delegated the operations to good officers.

She had to make certain their wounded were treated well, first of all.

"Clear out one of the barracks," Bronwyn ordered. "We must have a place for our wounded."

Yes, they really had been lucky. No Wardens were killed, but three had been badly wounded. Darach had been stabbed when rescuing Tara. Anders was anxious that he rest and recover, for he had lost a lot of blood. Nevin had taken an arrow through the throat, and was unable to speak at the moment. Hakan had taken a blow to the back that would have killed him, had he been wearing thinner armor.

Some of their Avvar climbers had been killed in the melee in the inner keep; Bronwyn was sorry for them, but glad not to lose Bustrum and Ostap, whom she had come to rely on. She was considering making them Wardens, but the two men did not seem very eager to Join.

Sten had been injured as well, when he had been felled by a heavy timber. Head wounds could be tricky; Anders was keeping an eye on him. Arranging a cot for him proved impossible. A large pile of straw served instead, covered in blankets and sheepskins. The stoic Qunari did not complain during his periods of consciousness, for this was indeed more satisfactory than squeezing onto a tiny, precarious cot. Or two.

Anders, Petra, and Niall were hard at work, healing the wounded. Bronwyn had insisted that their own

people must have precedence, but permitted them to see to the enemy, if their own strength held out. At that, the Orlesians were not so used to seeing magic in any form, and some were too frightened or hostile to allow themselves to be treated by mages. Some Orlesians protested. One weakly tried to lash out with a hidden knife.

"Back, maleficar!" he groaned. The knife dropped from his hand, and his eyes rolled whitely.

"Leave him alone!" cried one his comrades.

"You can't force it on them," Niall said to Anders, shaking his head. "If they'd rather suffer, that's their choice."

Altogether they had lost only twenty of their own, aided by surprise and the fact that most of the garrison had been asleep. Once the gate had been taken, the defenders had largely lost heart. More than two hundred Orlesians had been killed in the assault. Some of the wounded would eventually die as well. More than the dead and wounded, the Orlesians were dazed and stricken at how the despised Dog Lords had defeated them. It was a trick, some muttered. It had to be a trick.

"Of course it was a trick," one more pragmatic soul pointed out. "You can call any clever strategy a trick. Just as winning a duel could be due to a trick of swordsmanship. The Red Queen outwitted de Guesclin. We are defeated, all the same."

Fereldan morale was as high as Orlesian morale was low. One of the search parties had found the food stores, and sent the welcome message that Roc du Chevalier had supplies to survive years of seige. There was no reason to

stint anyone's rations. Some of the foodstuffs were already being transported to Gherlen's Halt.

Another party, Ser Norrel Haglin's, had located the stronghold's vault, and in it the paychest. Paychests. Lots of them. Gold was heavy, after all, and chests must be small enough that they could be lifted and carried. After coming to have a look, Bronwyn felt she needed to sit down and put her head between her legs. Her companions... her officers... her loyal troops must be rewarded. It was quite the coup. She had not planned to take the Rock for gold, but perhaps she should have. This fortune would fund many more troops and buy a fearsome battery of war machines. Haglin had a pair of clerks adding up the windfall. He was a man more greedy for honor and respect than for gold, so Bronwyn felt she could trust him to give her an accurate total.

She wanted to see more of this place that loomed so large in history and imagination. After the kitchens were raided for food, she set out exploring, accompanied by some of her Wardens.

The Rock was complex, and was more than a mere fortress. There was a handsome chapel, a well-stocked library, comfortable quarters for the junior officers, luxurious accommodations for the elite. There were also some apartments set aside for distinguished guests. A frightened servant, found hiding in a closet, showed them the best of them, the one called the "Imperial Suite," though the Empress had never come this far east. Emperor Flo-

rian, though, had once slept there, they were informed.

The door was unlocked by trembling hands, and flung wide. The servant bowed and preceded her, flicking away dust covers from the magnificent furniture.

"Andraste's nightgown!" muttered Bronwyn. Her exclamation was drowned out by the saltier expressions of her friends.

"Whoa!" Toliver was entranced, and with all sincerity said, "This is even nicer than the Pearl!"

"What's the Pearl?" asked Siofranni.

Oghren chuckled. "Best little whorehouse in Denerim."

Bronwyn cleared her throat, but was terribly tempted to burst out laughing. She had never visited a brothel herself, but this place really did resemble her mental picture of an expensive, decadent house of ill-repute. Perhaps it was all the red velvet. Or the gilded swags. Or the ankle-deep silk carpets. Or the paintings. Her people were already gathering in front of one, whose label evocatively entitled it "Beauty Surprised." Alistair's face was as red as the velvet draperies.

"I think her bottom is too big," said Adaia. "And if she were really surprised from behind like that, she shouldn't be smiling."

In an alcove was a glorious bed. There was a gilded crown-piece in the form of an Orlesian sunburst, anchoring elegant folds of yet more red velvet. The counterpane was worked with gold embroidery and a border of dazzling suns. There were carved and gilded steps rising up to it, since the bed was so absurdly high.

In front of the black marble mantelpiece was a sofa, also covered in red velvet, and piled with an assortment of jewel-colored silk cushions. It was made in a shape Bronwyn had not seen before. While one end rose up in a graceful curve, the other end ended without an arm. Aveline studied it.

"I think that's what my father called a 'fainting sofa,'" she said. she said. "Ladies swoon away on it decoratively, either before or after entertaining their gentlemen friends on it."

"Hmmm," Bronwyn responded, trying to imagine 'entertaining' Loghain on such an object. "Perhaps it's not long enough..."

Zevran sniggered. "No doubt Emperor Florian was far... *shorter* than your impressive king!" Tara elbowed him, grinning.

Over the mantelpiece was another painting, this one of some masked Orlesian courtiers watching naked dancing girls. It was fairly interesting, since the girls were of every race and type, though all were beautiful.

"No Qunaris, though," Brosca observed. "*That* would be interesting."

"It *would* be interesting to meet a female Qunari," said Bronwyn. "Simply looking at naked girls is *not* particularly interesting, however." She turned to the servant.

"I find those pictures vulgar. Remove them."

"Awww!" rose the protest. She ignored it.

"Take them away and replace them with something else. Do you have any tapestries?"

Rather indignantly, the servant drew himself up, and huffed, "This is a castle, and we have *many* tapestries..."

"I'm glad to hear it. Find something pleasant, with everyone wearing *clothes*. Hunting, feasting, music-making. Nothing insulting to Ferelden, either."

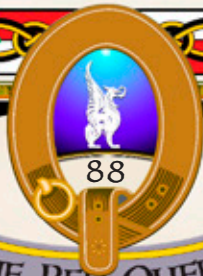
Oghren took the servant aside, and Bronwyn could well imagine where the paintings would go. She hardly cared. She could see that they were good art, but she found them distasteful. She did not know if Loghain would feel the same, but if he came here, she did not care to see him looking at any naked woman but herself. Actually... now that she thought of it... all this degeneracy made her think of him more fondly. He might be amused by this... Contemptuous, of course, no question... But amused, too...

"Guess what we found?" Adaia sang out.

An explosion of snickers behind her. A doorway, softened by draperies led into another room. Colored light shone through a stained-glass window.

A dressing room? And a bathing room. With a bathtub the likes of which she had never seen. This was a fantastical version of Bann Ceorlic's elaborate facilities, translated by the Gods.

The bath was huge, and of carved greenstone, richer than marble. It was set around the rim with onyx and amethyst and great opals. The taps which filled it were gold, in the shape of dragons, designed so water would pour out of their mouths instead of flames. Elaborate rugs softened the floor. A tall, gilt-framed looking glass stood in a corner, reflecting their deplorably raffish state. The wash basin – or might there be a grander name for such



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a work of art — ? sat on a greenstone pedestal, and was of cobalt Tevinter glass. Its taps were gold as well. Bronwyn looked about for a chamberpot or commode of equal gorgeousness, but saw only a throne-like chair nearby.

"Don't tell me..." Tara groaned. "Just don't."

Nonetheless, she approached the gilded object and lifted the hinged, brocaded seat.

"Right."

Bronwyn crowded to see with the rest. Sure enough, under the cushion was another seat, made of greenstone and carved for comfort, and a long, golden pipe leading down into darkness. Everyone burst out laughing.

The room was ridiculous. The Imperial Suite was ridiculous. It had not been used in twenty years. Everything here, in this farflung outpost of the Orlesian Empire, was infinitely grander than in the Queen's Apartments in Denerim. No wonder the Orlesians thought them savages. No wonder Orlesian peasants were notoriously poor and wretched. It was easy to see where the taxes went.

"Can I piss in it?" asked Oghren, still entranced by the golden pipes.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "If you wait until I am *out of the room*," she agreed. "And if you aim *very carefully*."

"Fair enough."

She stalked out of the bathroom and puzzled over the contents of the rest of the suite: the delicate desk and chair, exquisite works of marquetry; the crystal-shrouded oil



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lamps; the round table, inlaid with mother of pearl, suitable for private dining. She sighed, and dismissed the servant to find someone to stoke the hot-water boilers.

I feel ashamed to sleep here. I must, nonetheless, to make clear that I claim it by right of conquest.

The noise and giggles from the bathroom were slowly dying down. Bronwyn wondered if every single of her companions had used the facilities. Living together in camps had cured them of false modesty, but it was not a sight Bronwyn found particularly appealing.

Aveline was still smiling, as she joined Bronwyn, looking up at the plastered ceiling, molded artfully into scrolls and figures.

"You're going to need a maid, to keep up your position in an establishment like this."

"Ha!"

Bronwyn glumly thought Aveline was right. She might even have to have a new gown made. Her people gathered, restless; hoping to find good quarters for themselves.

Tara poked at a bronze and ivory statuette of a court lady. "So. This is the Rock. What are you going to do to celebrate?"

"Well, first of all," Bronwyn considered. "I should clean off all this blood in the Emperor's bath!"

"In *Queen Bronwyn's bath*," corrected Zevran.

"Yes." She laughed. "It is, isn't it?"

Val Royeaux was in turmoil. It was necessary to be very, very discreet. Revered Mother Dorothea had reliable agents

of her own, but some of them were known to her rivals in the Chantry. She dared not call any of them to her office. She herself was already under suspicion, due to her opposition to the event that today had claimed so many lives. It was that lack of favor to which she owed her own safety. She had been present, but back on the west side of the Cathedral among some of the lesser clergy. All of them had escaped unscathed.

A lightning storm in Guardian! They were most unusual, but not unknown. Lightning had struck the cathedral before, though never so disastrously. When the storm clouds had darkened, she had attempted to persuade the Grand Cleric to delay pronouncing anathema on the Fereldan Queen and Grand Cleric. She had been refused, with angry, bitter words. And for that matter, it was impossible to delay the ceremony, and thereby delay the departure of the army. Who could have foreseen such catastrophic weather? Was it a mere happenstance? The wrath of the Maker himself?

Or was it the work of sinister apostate mages, working hand in hand with the Fereldan heretics? That was the explanation given *ex cathedra* by the doddering Divine. It had not convinced many people, but if one repeated a lie often enough – repeated it loudly and often, and ruthlessly suppressed such inconveniences as evidence and facts – such a lie could become the truth. Perhaps it would. Others were whispering their own uneasy second thoughts. Had not Andraste herself been Fereldan?

The source of the storm was immaterial. What mattered was the ceremony of anathema itself. Dorothea felt that the Divine's handlers – so very much the creatures of the Empress and the expansionist party – had overreached themselves. Many had never set foot outside Orlais. For that matter, some had never left Val Royeaux. They could not be made to see that to intertwine Imperial interests with those of the Chantry was to cheapen and discredit the Chantry in the eyes of the rest of Thedas. Her own years in Ferelden had served her well. She had friends in Ferelden: devout clergy who did not deserve the blanket condemnation they had received today.

Nonetheless the army would march; if not today, then tomorrow. The invasion fleet, also, would sail tomorrow, despite the damage the storm had caused it. There was considerable apprehension there. Reports had come of the sinking of an Orlesian ship by a Nevarran patrol. There had been an explosion: the vessel had caught fire and sank with considerable loss of life. Now it was whispered by Orlesians sailors that the Nevarrans possessed the black powder of the Qunari: a terrifying weapon against which they had no defense. One daring soul had suggested copper-plating the hulls of Imperial ships. Even if the Empress would agree to such a shockingly expensive effort, it would take months, and ruin her plans. No, it must be presumed that this was a fluke; a bizarre happenstance. The fleet *would* sail, and they would destroy the impudent Fereldans. The captains – none of them

noble courtiers — did not hide their faces behind masks, and their expressions were grave.

Dorothea had read the conclusions of the Denerim Conclave herself, and had found food for thought in them. Muirin was no mere political careerist, but an honorable priest. So too were many of the names appearing in the document. The sincerity of Templars like Ser Bryant and Ser Rylock was beyond question, unless one closed one's ears to everything one did not wish to hear.

And Leliana! Wild, repentant Leliana! Dorothea knew her well, and trusted her sincere faith. Dorothea had rescued her from the consequences of her youthful crimes, and Leliana had spent two years as a lay sister in Lothing, perhaps on her way to the priesthood — or perhaps preparing to become a Seeker of Truth. Dorothea herself had given Leliana a Seeker's amulet, hoping that this reformed spirit would someday be a great warrior for the Maker. In a sense, that was exactly what she was. If Leliana believed in Bronwyn's deeds, that carried great weight with Dorothea.

Why should a brave heart not win the way to the Ashes? Whatever else one said about the young Queen of Ferelden, brave she unquestionably was. And the Ashes had effected a cure. Surely that could not be the trick of a demon, but a holy miracle.

Now, she must be brave, too. It would be a shameful thing not to warn her old friends in Ferelden that the Divine had cast them off. She did not care to see Muirin

tied to a stake and burned for the amusement of the Empress — and she did not care to trust Muirin's salvation to another direct intervention by the Maker. The Maker did not like having to repeat himself.

"Ser Silas," she said quietly, when the tall Templar passed her, as if by chance, in the north cloister.

"Revered Mother."

Silas Corthwaite was a Fereldan himself, of course; he had fought against Orlais during the Fereldan Rebellion. He had joined the Templars in middle age, finding peace and purpose in the Maker's service. That said, he was appalled at the Divine's sweeping pronouncements, and was very much of her mind about the Denerim conclave.

"I believe there are early snowdrops in the cloister garden," she remarked. "Quite near the sundial."

"Are there indeed?" he remarked. "I must take a moment to admire them."

"Then Maker speed you, my son," said Mother Dorothea, as she passed on.

The Templar bowed, and strode out to the wintry garden. Sure enough, by the sundial, some little white flowers peeped out of the dead grass. He bent to gather a handful, breathed their fugitive fragrance with a slight smile; and then deftly pulled the sealed letter and the travel pass from behind the loose stone in the base of the sundial. In the confusion of the disaster and the army's departure, no one would notice one more Templar on horseback.



Jowan, Carver, and Fenris had been alarmed by the dark smoke rising over Gherlen's Halt. They were bewildered when they found themselves in the midst of a wild celebration. The gate guards had a keg of ale, and were pretty far gone

"We're Grey Wardens!" Carver shouted. "We have urgent news for the Queen!"

A grizzled crossbowman shoved a tankard at him. "She's at the Rock, laddie! You'll have to track her down there!"

Jowan goggled. "She's a prisoner?"

The soldiers at the gate roared with laughter, and pounded the newcomers on the backs – even Fenris, who did not at all appreciate it. The dogs milled about anxiously.

"Not a *prisoner!* Last night she sneaked up, climbed the wall, and took the Rock right from under the Orlesian's snotty noses! Captured it, she did! Set herself up there and she's looting the place six ways from sundown. Plenty for all, says she, Maker bless her!"

A moment of shocked incomprehension. Then Carver took a drink.

"The smoke?" he asked.

The genial guard shrugged. "Pyres. We didn't lose many, but a lot of Orlesians went to the Maker! And good riddance. Better to burn them than leave them stinking up the place!"

Carver agreed, and then gave Fenris a brief explanation about why the conquest of Roc du Chevalier was a very great deed, and a mighty strategic triumph for Ferelden.



"Now we control Gherlen's Pass, which is the quickest, easiest route into Ferelden. A land force would have to go through the Jader Bay Hills, which are too rugged for cavalry. I've never seen the Rock myself. Come on!"

Cliffs towered on either side, The huge mass of Roc du Chevalier was revealed, bit by bit, as they tramped up the Imperial Highway, past throngs of jubilant soldiers. On their way, the two Wardens ran into people they knew. Jubilant soldiers slapped them on the back, filling in details of the night assault. Wagons rumbled back and forth between the two fortresses. The crowd at the gate of Roc du Chevalier was so dense that it was difficult to shove their way through. Alistair, taking in the sights on the top of the parapet, saw them and gave a shout.

"Let them through! They're Wardens!"

Guards squeezed back some of the milling mass and the three travelers pressed on. Alistair bounded down from the wall, Scrapper behind him, tail wagging.

"Glad to see you!" He was grinning, glowing with victory and some first-class Orlesian wine. Scrapper smelled his littermates and went wild.

Briefly, Jowan introduced their companion. "This is Fenris. Originally from Tevinter. Helped us out on our mission. Thought he'd like to to help us fight darkspawn."

"Terrific with a greatsword," Carver added.

"From Tevinter?" Alistair whistled, and then reached out to take Fenris' hand in a warrior's welcome. "You've come

a long way to help! Good news from Denerim?"

"Some of it is," Carver said evasively. Bronwyn deserved to be the first to know about his stepfather.

They were led through the immense gate, under unused murder holes, past guard posts now manned by grinning Fereldans. Dalish elves wandered the corridors, critiquing the designs on walls and balustrades. At the end of a long hall loomed an arched opening, which took them into what was probably usually a council chamber, but was today a smallish throne room. On a dais covered with silk, Bronwyn sat enthroned in an x-shaped chair of ebony and ivory, awarding trophies to a line of smug, often tipsy officers. Beside her was a chest full of gold trinkets and fancy dress weapons. A lithe, golden-skinned elf stood to one side, eyes searching the room for danger. Fenris recognized the behavior. After all, he had been a body guard himself. A very pretty elf girl in leather armor was helping the queen sort through the treasure.

Carver grinned. "Everybody gets a prize today?"

Alistair whispered, "Some of the loot is still warm from the original owners' bodies!"

"She's killed all the chevaliers?"

"Of course not! Well... some of them. Anyway, once they surrendered, their arms and armor... and *everything* was her legitimate booty." He grinned. "She gave me this," He pointed at the new dagger on his belt. Carver whistled softly.

"Rubies on the handle! Nice."

Bronwyn called up the next man, smiling. In her hands was a chased gold goblet.

"— Captain Rhys, take this as a keepsake of the battle, with my thanks for your good service..."

As the man stepped back, bowing, Bronwyn looked up and caught Alistair's wave. She saw Jowan and Carver, and her smile burst forth like sunshine. Fenris was struck by it.

"I'm so glad to see you! Bann Alistair, make sure they have food and drink. I'll speak to them later in my quarters!" She resumed her gift-giving.

"— And now, Captain Valenta, this is for you..."

"That is the Queen?" Fenris said, his eyes on her.

After hearing so much, he was not sure what he had expected. She was not in armor, but in a gown of crimson silk, a ruby-studded diadem on her brow. She looked softer and more beautiful than the dragon-riding hero of Carver's tales, and much more like the noble lady that Arl Nathaniel had described. Even at this distance he had seen the flash of her brilliant green eyes. Her smile, however, had taken him by surprise.

"Yup, that's our Bronwyn," Carver agreed fondly. "Come on. She said something about food."

Fenris knew enough about Wardens by now not to stand between a Warden and a meal.

"Who were those elves?" he asked Jowan. "Are they also Wardens?"

"Tara is. Zevran isn't. He's a former Crow."



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Fenris raised his brows. Everyone had heard of the Crows. Zevran, presumably, was a *very* competent bodyguard.

Instead of taking their party down to the mess hall, Alistair led them upstairs, to a sumptuous private parlor, where a feast was laid out. A mob of humans, dwarves, and elves were lounging, drinking, eating, and laughing. A bald man with a scarred head was playing a merry dance on a lute.

"Look!" Alistair shouted, by way of greeting. "It's Carver and Jowan! And... er..."

"Fenris."

"And Fenris!"

A pair of mischievous-faced dwarf girls peered at them over the top of a long table.

"Fenris," said Jowan. "These ladies are Brosca and Sigrun. Fear them."

Out of scale as they were, they looked like menacing children, sitting there with gold cups in their hands. Brosca was wearing a gold neck torque on her head. Sigrun had woven gold beads into her pigtails. They were both very drunk.

"Hi, guys!" Brosca said, eyes glassy. "We just beat the shit out the Orlesians! Some place, huh? Bronwyn's room is fancier than the King of Orzammar's! Or at least my sister's room. Er... are there three of you?"

Carver pulled up a chair on the other side of the table, eyeing the rich food and fragrant wine greedily. "Carver," he said, pointing to himself. "Jowan, and Fenris."

"Do I know you?" Brosca asked, squinting at Fenris.



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"No."

"Are you an *Orlesian*?"

"Hardly."

"Oh, good. Try this," she said, pouring a golden liquid from a crystal decanter. "It's Orlesian Honeywine. It's pretty good. More of a kick than you'd expect."

Fenris dutifully tasted it. It was sweeter than he liked, but not unpleasant.

"Come to Join our merry band?" asked Sigrun, with an odd emphasis on the word "Join."

"I was told I could fight with you, even if I were not a Warden."

"Oh, sure," Brosca gestured expansively. "We take all sorts. You'll see sense in time. Try the sausage." She shoved a gold platter at him, laden with delicacies.

Sigrun kissed her fingers. "Umm! So good! Alistair likes that cheese with the blue mold, but I think it's rotten."

"It's not rotten!" Alistair protested. "It's ripe!" He sat down by the cheese plate and snatch up a mouthful. "Ahhh! Bliss!"

Not all the Wardens were indulging themselves. Danith had gone to the hospital barracks to see Darach, and with her were Cathair, Siofranni, Steren, and Nuala. Niall saw them coming through, and went to meet them.

"Darach's sleeping, but I think he'll be fine. He'll need rest and lots of liquids. Come on. I'll show you."

The Fereldan sick were fairly quiet. If they were not



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sleeping, they were cheerful, at least, and out of pain. Danith would have preferred it if there had been a true Dalish Keeper among them, who might understand her own people better. A few Dalish had been hurt, but Danith had to acknowledge that their human Healers were honorable folk, and treated all alike with care.

As she passed, she spoke to the elves, all of whom she recognized.

Cathair found a bench, and carried it over to Darach's cot.

"Ah, his color is better," murmured Nuala.

"Should be," remarked a human soldier who lay on the nearest cot. "The Queen came by not long ago with the news that every soldier who fought today is getting three gold sovereigns! Is this a great country or what?"

Danith snorted faintly, and then leaned closer when she noticed Darach's eyelids flutter. He smiled.

"So it is," he whispered. "Might I have some water, *lethalan*? Tara gave me some earlier, but I still thirst."

She lifted a waterskin to his lips carefully, and let him have his fill.

"Niall thinks you will be well soon," she said. She examined his bandage, and sniffed thoughtfully. The wound was clean.

"And the others?" Darach asked. "Hakan was sore hurt."

"I do not know. We shall visit our fellow Wardens when we leave you," Danith promised, a little ashamed that she needed this reminder. "And we shall see Sten, as well. It is a strange thing, that the elvhen should be hurt in a battle



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between humans. 'A great country?'" she quoted, glancing at the dozing human. "I do not know. I know that in the ways that matter, it is not our country, nor is Bronwyn our queen."

"But she is our friend," Darach whispered. "and that *does* matter."

"True," Danith sighed. It was, indeed, more or less true.

"A strange state of affairs," agreed Cathair, "but we must do all we can to keep back the Orlesians. If they win, our homeland is as dust. It is fortunate that we are here to do our part. These soldiers will not forget that elves stood with them."

Steren considered that. "Should we send word to Lanaya and Marethari and Merrill? They were waiting for news of darkspawn, but this is as great a danger. The Orlesian army is on the march, according to Zevran."

Danith bit her lip, and then agreed. "Yes, it must be done. The sooner they come, the better."



Bronwyn sent word when she was back in her private quarters. Carver, Jowan, and Fenris were asked to come and report, and she asked Alistair to join them.

"This is Fenris," said Carver. "He joined us in Kirkwall and wanted to fight alongside the Wardens."

Fenris thought the Queen quite as attractive close up as she was at a distance. He had been told of the long scar on her face, but it was faint and not disfiguring. He bowed respectfully, in the Tevinter style.

"Welcome, Fenris," Bronwyn said, not sure what to make

of the strange markings. This was clearly no Dalish elf. "We are happy to welcome friends and comrades! You are from Kirkwall, then?"

"No, Your Majesty. I am originally from Tevinter."

A pause. Bronwyn's first thoughts were of Tevinter agents and magisters.

"You're a long way from home."

Jowan stepped in. "Fenris used to be a slave in Tevinter. He escaped and the magister who owned him sent bounty hunters to capture him. Arl Nathaniel couldn't see anyone enslaved. He and Adam – Bann Adam – were impressed with Fenris' skills with a greatsword—"

" – We all were," Carver put in.

" – And he joined our party. He's done good service. Either one of the noblemen would have been glad to have him in their guards, but Fenris thought he'd like to try the Wardens."

Fenris spoke up. "The Wardens," he said, "seem far more comfortable with elves bearing swords."

Bronwyn laughed. "That's true enough!"

They were suitably impressed by the splendor of her quarters – though perhaps not as impressed as people would be who had never visited Nevarra – but Bronwyn did not give them time to look about them. They sat around the small dining table, and Bronwyn served them wine and little Orlesian cakes flavored with anise and almonds. Carver knew he needed no more wine, but it made giving her his news easier.

"We brought you some letters..."

"I'll read them later. Tell me the news yourself! Is Loghain well? Is he on the march?" She saw the shadow flit across Carver's face. "What happened? Tell me!"

"The Nevarran embassy was a big success," Carver said slowly, "and the King is fine and he coming with three thousand men. But..."

"I don't like that 'but,'" she said. "Tell me the worst straight out. *Then* give me the good news to sweeten it a bit."

"All right. My stepfather Arl Bryland was assassinated eleven days ago."

Bronwyn had expected nearly everything but that. "Cousin Leonas! Dead!"

Jowan saw how it upset Carver, and took up the tale. "It was at your brother's wedding, as they were leaving the Cathedral."

Carver put up a hand, and Jowan was silenced. "A man rushed up holding flowers for my mother. While everyone was distracted, he stabbed the arl in the heart. He died almost instantly. Bethany couldn't do anything for him."

"Who did it?" Bronwyn demanded, her face terrible.

"A poor half-wit," Carver said heavily. "Trained to strike and babble verses from the Chant of Light afterwards. He was not able to give a sensible name to the one who used him as a catspaw. He was executed, of course. It's clear that the arl was a target because of his pro-mage stance."

"Your poor mother!"

"Yes, she's taken it hard. The arl left her as his regent in

South Reach, and provided well for everyone.”

Bronwyn frowned, sick at the idea of Cousin Leonas paying such a price for being brave and fair and outspoken. He had been such a kind friend to her and loyal servant of the kingdom. Was it the Chantry? Was it the Orlesians? Or most likely, pro-Orlesian, anti-mage fanatics...

She could not like Habren, but she could not consider this loss without understanding how much more painful it would be for her cousin. “I shall miss him sorely. And how is Habren taking it? To lose her father...”

“I haven’t seen her,” Carver said. “She wasn’t at the funeral. Kane says she’s sick. Expecting a child, you see, and not in good shape.”

“I’ve seen her,” Jowan spoke up. “Arl Kane called me to see to her, when he broke the news. She’s been very unwell and keeping to her room. Her father’s death hit her hard. She became hysterical. I had to give her a calming potion.” He pressed his lips together, uncertain if he should say more in front of the others. He looked at Bronwyn in mute appeal.

Bronwyn gave him a nod, understanding that there was more to the story. She would hear it later. Habren would have to wait.

“Well, I’m very sorry for her,” she said, trying to be. “Tell me about the embassy. Were the Nevarrans receptive?”

This was a far pleasanter topic, and Carver and Jowan took turns with the tale, giving every detail, from their gruesome voyage, to their meeting with Varric and Fenris

in Kirkwall, to the strange Warden prison (which puzzled Bronwyn exceedingly) to the glories of Nevarra.

Next they told of the very concrete evidences of friendship given by the king in gold, ships... and wives.

“Nathaniel is married!” She shrugged, secretly displeased, but resigned. “We suspected it would happen. Tell me all about the lady.”

She heard about the beauties of Callista Pentaghost and also about the charms of Carver new sister-in-law, Berenice. Then Carver, returning to the blood and thunder bits he liked best, told her how Jowan had sunk an Orlesian warship on the high seas.

“Andraste’s nightgown!” cried Bronwyn, slapping the arm of her inlaid chair. “You didn’t!”

Jowan blushed, and grinned like a fool. “I really did.”

“Well done! We may need more of those fireballs very soon. Look here — I’ve been giving rewards all day, and I might as well reward you as well, for you certainly deserve it!”

She got up and rummaged through one of the treasure chests. “Here are some rings. They’re quite nice. Let’s find some to fit you.” She smiled at Fenris’ apprehensive expression. “Yes, you too, Fenris.”

Bronwyn awakened in her ridiculous red-velvet room. Even the light through the draperies was red. It was a bit like waking in the belly of a monster. She was not alone. In this huge room and this huge bed there was plenty

of space for some of her comrades. Aveline and Catriona shared the bed, with Maeve sleeping at the foot. Brosca was snoring on the fainting sofa, and Sigrun, Danith, Siofranni and Adaia seemed comfortable enough, wrapped in furs on the soft carpet and an assortment of cushions. Siofranni and Adaia, indeed, were wrapped up together, and Bronwyn understood that they were now openly a couple. The hahren of the Alienage might not approve, but Wardens could choose whom they liked.

Scout was in the warm spot by the fireplace, tail twitching in doggy dreams.

They had celebrated late and long in the course of the day before, but Bronwyn awakened to a new set of problems, and was still facing the arrival of a large Orlesian army by the beginning of Drakonis. She held the Rock. This was a magnificent fortress, and she should be able to hold it even against an army of thousands — even against the darkspawn, unless the Archdemon came here itself and shattered it to its foundations. If they worked diligently in the next few days, the sappers and engineers could create more of the defenses that already filled Gherlen's Pass. Was that enough?

She sat up, trying not to wake Catriona, and slipped out of bed, pushing aside the bed curtains, and going to the window to touch the pane and judge the temperature. Still mild. No hard frost had slowed the thaw. A pang of anxiety made her stomach roil. Any day now... any day...

It's only a matter of time.

She could be alone in the sumptuous bathroom, and so went in there and washed her face, brooding. Loghain needed to know about the Rock. He needed to know about a few other things too. Since she knew the route he was taking west, it should not be difficult to send him a message.

Her reflection studied her from the mirror. Bronwyn did not much like her washed-out appearance. Too much wine; too much stress; too little sleep. Her dreams were turbulent: everything was rushing about as the chess pieces were arranged. Were they her own pieces or another's?

Adaia trailed in, squinting at the colored light from the window. It made a patch of soft red and blue on the floor.

"Is it day already?"

"Afraid so," said Bronwyn. "Another day. We need to get dressed, round up something to eat, and have a talk."

"I can go and have something sent from the kitchens. Do you want it here or in that parlor we found?"

"In the parlor. I want everyone present for a council."

"We don't even get one day off after that big victory?"

"No," Bronwyn laughed, rather rueful. "We celebrated all day yesterday. Now it's time to get back to work!"

"Speaking of getting back to work," said Aveline from the great bed, "I hope there's a laundry in this castle. I'm on my last set of clean smallclothes."

Despite hangovers, minor contusions from the battle, and general sloth, everyone managed to get up, rouse the late

sleepers, and collect in the parlor that had been claimed by the Wardens. Only a few were missing: Niall and Petra had stayed overnight at the infirmary, tending the wounded. Anders would have to go down there soon and take his turn. There were non-magical healers among the troops, of course, and they could take over more and more of the care, as the worst of the injuries were healed by magic.

"I'll need to visit our wounded, too," Bronwyn remarked, between spoonfuls of porridge. "I'll go down with you. First, let's make some plans. No getting drunk today, please – or any drunker than absolutely necessary," she added, with a glance at Oghren. "We need to keep our eyes open. Leliana will be back from her patrol tomorrow, and I want some of you to go back to the lodge. We need to keep a close eye on the Imperial Highway and Jader. I don't think many defenders escaped the fall of the Rock yesterday, but some might have, and they might well have reached Jader by now and reported."

Danith volunteered for this. She preferred the lodge in the forest – and even the cold, long watches in the trees – to the noise and smell of a shemlen fortress. Besides, this place was full of elvhen reduced to servitude: timid, beaten-down, submissive. They made her queasy. All the more reason to admire Adai's spirit. A pity more city elves were not like her. At least some of the ones in Denerim had slipped away with Marethari and her people. They might still be saved. She glanced at the newcomer Fenris.

He intrigued her. Clearly a notable warrior, respected by Carver and Jowan. Not Dalish, but not like a city elf either. And those markings...

"I shall go," she said, "after I, too, visit the wounded. Perhaps Darach will be recovered enough to join us. The clean air would do him good."

Anders was not so sure. "Maybe. As long as he takes it *easy*."

"Furthermore," continued Danith, "one of our number must go and take a message to the rest of the Dalish. We have come to the conclusion that the Orlesians present almost as great a danger to the elvhen as the darkspawn. Many Dalish would come to help protect our new homeland."

Siofranni said, "I can run fast. I can take a southern route and reach them within a few days."

"Very well," Bronwyn said, with a concerned glance at the elf girl. "There is no question but that they would be welcome. We need all the swords and bows we can get, and the Keepers' magic too."

The Dalish nodded, satisfied that Bronwyn, at least, valued them.

"And there's one more thing," Bronwyn added, leaning back, playing with her golden cup, running over the raised designs with her fingertips. "I really don't like having the Aeonar at our back..."

"Yes!" cried Tara, very pleased.

"...but we can't spare a lot of people to seize it. Based on the notes you brought back, this seems to be a radical fac-

tion of the Chantry, with a very unpleasant agenda. While the Chantry might have some legal basis for claiming to have jurisdiction of mages – save your breath, Anders – they have no legal right whatever to experiment upon and to torture to death non-magical subjects of the Fereldan Crown. I don't want to make trouble for the dwarves, but I think if it's explained to their leaders that these people are trying to cut the dwarves out of their lyrium profits, they'll look the other way... or maybe help. So... "

Tara beamed, popping almonds into her mouth. "So?"

"I still can't spare a lot of people for this, but I'll let you go and find Loghain, Tara. Yes. Find Loghain. There's a lot he needs to know, anyway. I'll give you a letter to him. Take your usual party with you – except Darach, of course. Loghain is in the Deep Roads and should be only a few days away – "

"I could go, too," Jowan offered.

"So could I," Carver chimed in, not feeling at all friendly toward "radical factions" of the Chantry.

"Jowan can go," Bronwyn allowed. "But not you, Carver, nor you, Fenris. Jowan can caste Haste and move the party along, but we're likely to need swords very soon. Once Tara finds Loghain, he'll have plenty of men to secure the Aeonar."

The Rock's former commander, Berthold de Guesclin, had been kept under guard in his own quarters, far from his former subordinates. It was unlikely that he could

escape, unless he was as brilliant a climber as Bronwyn, had found a way to make a rope from his bedclothes—which might take him half-way down, and then was able jump the rest of the distance and somehow survive. His elf mistress was his only companion. His rooms had been thoroughly searched, and all his letters and documents confiscated and taken to Bronwyn to be studied. The captives' meals were plain, but plentiful, and brought in by loyal Fereldans, who were instructed to tell him nothing. However, de Guesclin did give them a message, and for that reason, was escorted to the impromptu throne room for an audience. His firebrand lover remained locked up.

"You wish to be ransomed," Bronwyn said, ensconced in the x-shaped chair she fancied, her head leaning on a hand. "You wish to give your parole. The usual terms, I presume: you would swear never again to bear arms against Ferelden, its people, or its rulers."

"I would so swear," de Guesclin declared. "My ransom would not be stinted. My wife will pay you a thousand gold Orlesian sovereigns, to be delivered upon my arrival home. De Guesclins keep their word."

Bronwyn eyed him for some time. De Guesclin was a brave man, but could not help fidgeting a little. Many were in attendance, to witness this conversation and to defend their Queen. The knights, Faraday and Haglin, were there, regarding him like a felon; the handsome young warrior glaring at him was the bastard son of King Maric, the one

whom the Empress would have liked to have caught in her net. An armed and smiling elf watched the proceeding from the sidelines, all coiled stillness, placing himself so that any untoward movements by de Guesclin would be met with a dagger in the back. Others, human, elf, and dwarf, ranged about the green-eyed queen. Most were Wardens, he suspected. All looked fairly hostile. Queen Bronwyn, surprisingly, was the least overtly menacing of them.

"I would like to take your word," she finally said. "You are a brave man, and I believe you love your country. It gives me no pleasure to oppress such. I have had the quality of mercy preached to me in circumstances and by beings that you cannot imagine. For that matter, it would be convenient to be rid of you. A thousand sovereigns would be a pleasant sum. I am not inclined to haggle, though if I were, I believe you could raise far more. I would accept the sum, though I would not release you until the gold was in my possession." She put up a hand to forestall his protests.

"However, such an arrangement presupposes that I *can*, in fact, trust your word. You are flushed, Monseigneur. Do not dare to be indignant. I am a Fereldan, after all. Orlesians invaded us, robbed us, raped us, oppressed us for eighty long years. Do you think we did not notice that you felt no obligation to keep your word to us? Was it not openly declared that to swear falsely to a mere dog of a Fereldan was no dishonor, since '*it was impossible to break faith with an animal?*' My father and grandfather heard those words; my

mother and grandmother as well. What say you?"

De Guesclin blew out a breath. "Your Majesty, I am a man of honor. I do not wish to be judged by the actions of people long ago — people who acted in different circumstances, from different motives. You are the daughter of a noble and honorable man. As one noble to another, I wish to see my family once more."

Bronwyn refrained from asking if he intended to take his feisty little elven mistress home with him. She kept looking at him. She would love to get rid of this hungry mob of Orlesians, but she did not wish to find herself besieged by them immediately afterward.

"You do realize," she said slowly, "that if I ever saw you in arms against me, I would have a perfect right to slay you on the spot as an outlaw and oathbreaker — as a dishonored felon and no true knight? That if opportunity came my way, I would be justified on taking vengeance against your family and dispossessing them of everything they owned?"

She was considering the possibility at least. De Guesclin's heart swelled with hope. He was also perfectly aware that a man like Ser Norrel Haglin would be pleased to hang him from the battlements, simply because he was an Orlesian. And then too, when Loghain arrived, De Guesclin expected his options to diminish alarmingly. He must find a way for the Red Queen to trust him. And quickly.

"Where is your home?" Bronwyn asked.

"Chateau Corbelin, north of Montsimnard, Majesty."

The green gaze did not flicker. "Do not imagine that the distance to the Orlesian Heartlands would offer your security from my just revenge, Monseigneur," she told him. "I shall consider your petition. You have my leave to go."

The Orlesian bowed, and then retreated to the door, walking backwards, and then bowed again. It was proper Orlesian etiquette, and the courtesy made Bronwyn think better of the man.

Ser Norrel, who now otherwise approved mightily of his young Queen, feared that she might be too soft on their enemies.

"The Orlesians would have hanged us all by now, if we'd lost, you know. Or worse. Even the wounded."

Bronwyn smiled tightly. "They are not our teachers. Why should I copy an Orlesian in anything?"

"Would you really ransom de Guesclin and his chevaliers, Your Majesty?" Ser Blayne asked, worried.

"I might," Bronwyn mused. "eventually. Not with an Orlesian army heading our way, but perhaps eventually. I've stripped the Orlesian officers of their weapons and valuables. They would walk out of here in their small-clothes and shirts." She huffed a laugh. "I *might* let them keep their boots, but no weapons of any kind. Even with the great stores of weapons at Jader, it would be difficult for the Orlesians to rearm them all adequately at short notice. However, I will not let them go without the ransom in hand. Anything else would be absurd. Ransoming over fifty nobles and knights would fill our coffers. I'm more concerned about what to do with the common soldiers. I

don't want them packed in the dungeons for months on end. We'll end up with a plague, at the very least. Some of them can be integrated into the troops here."

"But not many," Ser Blayne cautioned her.

"No, not many. Some could be sent inland and resettled in distant Fereldan postings. Most we will simply have to let go. We might march them to Solidor or Jader, and let them keep walking west."

Ser Norrel could not help pointing out the obvious. "Most of them would set up as bandits."

Bronwyn shrugged. "Then they will be the Orlesians' problem, rather than ours. It's true that many are conscripts, probably hoping for a chance to escape the army altogether. In fact," she considered further, "I might let the commoners keep their *breeches*, so as to be able to blend in." She sighed. "But I really, really, cannot let anyone go now, to swell the army that is coming. It would be madness."

Ser Norrel snorted, "I suppose just killing them all is out of the question?"

"It is not a crime to serve one's country," Bronwyn said, trying not to snap at the man. "And our own people might find slaughtering hundreds of unarmed men like pigs more difficult than you imagine. I'd rather find a use for the Orlesians, if I can trust enough of them to make the effort worthwhile."

Bronwyn's dreams were even more disturbed that night,

and the following day, Leliana returned with her party, very concerned as well. The bard's dreams had been wild, frantic, and filled with tireless activity and endless, endless stairs...

And Leliana was not pleased to have been left out of the storming of Roc du Chevalier. She arrived, with Shale thumping behind; with Ulfa and Asa at her side, with a train of dwarves happy to find a decent meal awaiting them. However, she also arrived to find everything changed, and a great many Orlesians imprisoned. After she and her companions were shown to the Wardens' parlor and had something to eat, she asked outright to speak to Bronwyn privately. Once in the solitude of the Imperial Suite, Leliana's unhappiness burst forth.

"Did you think I would refuse to follow you? Did you think I would tell? Had you already decided to attack when you sent me to the Deep Roads?"

Bronwyn had expected this response, though not to the extent of Leliana's eyes growing red with unshed tears. Still, there was nothing to do but be frank about it.

"Yes, I had planned it for some time. I did not for a moment think you'd betray us, but I did consider the possibility that was unique to you: that you might be put in the painful position of having to cross swords with a friend. Why subject you to that, when I did indeed need someone to keep an eye on the darkspawn?"

Leliana understood, but was still unhappy. She slumped on the red velvet sofa and took a dainty cup of tea from

Bronwyn. Eventually she took note of her surroundings.

"How beautiful everything is!" she murmured, stroking the velvet.

"If you want a bath," Bronwyn gestured, rather amused, "go have a look at the bathing facilities in there. We kept the servants on who were assigned to stoke the boilers."

Leliana followed her gesture, and after a moment Bronwyn heard her delighted exclamations.

"I must find my clean clothes!"

"Your things are stowed in the Wardens' parlor. I had them brought over. We have more room here than we had at the Halt, Maker knows. Look here, Leliana. I did what I did to spare you from something that might have hurt you badly. Perhaps it's only putting off the inevitable, but I meant it for the best. The Orlesian army is coming; it's coming soon. By the first of Drakonis it should reach Jader, and then we're in for quite the time. Whatever the darkspawn are doing, the political situation is blowing up. Have you seen Carver or Jowan?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, they're back from a mission to Nevarra, which was quite successful. And... when they were in Denerim, my cousin Arl Bryland was murdered by a fanatic."

Leliana's blue eyes were very wide. "It is certain that it was an Orlesian?"

"No. I might well have been a Chantry conservative. The murderer was apparently an imbecile, trained for the pur-

pose, who spouted the Chant of Light. The arl was killed in front of his family, and died nearly instantly."

"What a wicked thing!"

"Obviously I agree, but someone must have thought it a righteous act. Surely the Divine has by now seen the results of the Denerim Conclave. Who knows what she made of them?"

"With all the proofs... all the evidence... surely... "

"I don't know," Bronwyn shrugged. "Some people believe only what they find convenient. We must accept that the Divine is our enemy... or at least those close to her are. And you might as well know where Tara has gone. She's found the Aeonar prison, as I'm sure you've heard. She visited there again, and discovered that they are performing experiments on non-mages: experiments with the Rite of Tranquility, designed to create submissive laborers. The notes she brought back suggest they're interested in lyrium mining, which as you know is something that only dwarves can perform with any degree of safety. If, however, they could create miners who would obey even at the inevitable cost of their lives..."

"I cannot believe that the Divine would consent to this!"

"We found no proof that she knows of it. It might well be the idea of a few lunatics. Nonetheless, they've got control of a base, and we can't allow such things to continue. Tara's gone to join forces with Loghain and shut them down."

"But... how horrible... but... "

"Come on. We'll find someone to clean your armor, and you can have a lovely bath."

Leliana shook her head, baffled. "The darkspawn are restless. I have seen them in my dreams. They are preparing to attack. How can people be so foolish, when such a danger threatens? How can they pretend that nothing has changed, when everything has changed? They have Wardens. The Wardens must have warned them."

"Ah, but none of the their Wardens is also their Queen."

Morrigan lay back on the elegant bed, holding up the curious talisman to the red firelight. Her smile was not pleasant.

"What's that?" Anders asked, pouncing onto the bed from the other side. "Ugly thing. Looks Chasind... maybe."

"'Tis not Chasind," Morrigan corrected him coolly. "'Tis... older."

"Worth anything, do you think?"

"A great deal, to me. I shall never let it leave my possession."

Anders had a certain gleam in his eye, so Morrigan turned her attention to her own pleasures. He was extremely well-trained now, and knew exactly how to satisfy her. Perhaps another woman would grow bored with the same man giving her the same reliable, intense release, night after night, but Morrigan was not bored. She did not intend to remove her claws from Anders anytime soon. Perhaps never. Flemeth had stipulated that Morrigan was go into hiding *alone* after accomplishing her task, but Morrigan had come to the conclusion that



Flemeth simply wished to isolate Morrigan for her own convenience. Morrigan had not the least intention of attempting the difficult parts of her task without a brilliant Healer in attendance, nor without surrounding herself with every comfort possible.

Besides, Anders was not simply her intended Grey Warden mate; nor merely her handsome lover; nor even only the useful Healer she required. He amused her in other ways than in bed, and he understood the importance of decent hygiene. At the moment he smelled pleasantly of soap, oil of bergamot, and sex.

It was all very delightful. Flemeth had scorned luxury and despised comfort, and had tried to inculcate those values in Morrigan. In the past few months, however, Morrigan had discovered that life had better things to offer than preparing root-and-rodent stew to Flemeth's taste and sleeping in a shanty in a swamp, while entertaining a succession of hairy, stinking barbarians at Flemeth's behest.

It was an ugly sort of training, Morrigan now realized; the sort of training a pimp or madam would put a young girl through when breaking her to whoredom. Flemeth wanted Morrigan to perform well enough to seduce any man; and to be so desensitized to other aspects of sex that any man would be exactly the same to her as any other. It was all part of Flemeth's Great Plan. Luckily for Morrigan, Flemeth was – at least temporarily – dead, and Morrigan had her own plans.



Had Flemeth grasped how much Morrigan's life would change when she sent her to join Bronwyn Cousland? Wise and powerful as Flemeth was, Morrigan suspected that some things – like simple comradeship – were completely beyond her ken. Nor did she grasp the lure of luxury, the joy of appropriating this comfortable bed and well-furnished chamber from the wealthy noble now locked away in the dungeons below.

A flare of white light exploded behind her eyes, fading slowly into a series of ecstatic spasms. Anders relaxed, clutching her close, sweat trickling down his sides. And then he kissed her sweetly, as he always did afterwards. She even condescended to kiss him back. They arranged themselves for sleep, but Morrigan lay awake, thinking, listening to Anders' breathing even out, her hand on the talisman under the pillow. If the object was what she believed it to be, she would hold it close. Had she believed it possible, she would have destroyed it, though she suspected unpleasant things might happen to anyone who tried it. Flemeth would perhaps live again, but not in Morrigan's own lifetime.

The bones of Flemeth's plans remained. Anders' dreams were disturbed of late. All the Wardens felt that darkspawn were near to rising. Eventually the Archdemon would reveal itself, and Bronwyn would march against the horde. Flemeth had expressed considerable confidence in Bronwyn's destiny to stop the Blight. At some point,

Morrigan would have to cease taking her doses of contraceptive tea, if she wished to perform the rite that would make her the mother of a God.



BERTHOLD DE GUESCLIN

CHAPTER 4

UNDER THE
WANING MOON

LOGHAIN FORCE-MARCHED MARIC'S SHIELD, BRINGING THEM THROUGH THE DEEP ROADS AT A FIERCE PACE. It had been a hard

march westward, even mostly underground. There were delays and problems at every halt.

Other troops followed in his wake. Nathaniel, in command of the men of Amaranthine as well as shepherding the baggage train, came through in due course. His own experience in the Deep Roads heartened his men. Behind him were Arl Wulffe's troops on their way to the Neck, accompanied by the South Reach contingent, which had been slowed by their reaction to the death of their Arl. The presence of Corbus had done a great deal of good for morale. As far as experience was concerned, he was green as grass; but he was a useful figurehead for officers and rankers to rally around.

Adam Hawke had turned north to Amaranthine early on. Loghain had sent a message to Amaranthine with Hawke that their new little fleet was to sail past the

Narrows and take a position off Jader, watching for an Orlesian fleet. When sighted, they were to destroy every ship they possibly could.

He had not sent only a message, however, but fifteen mages as well. Every one of them could cast a fireball. Loghain did not just want the Orlesian fleet stopped: he wanted it destroyed, down to the last splinter of the last lifeboat. Uldred had assured him that the mages could create a mist that would shroud their ships from easy view until they were ready to attack. In addition to fireballs, there were other spells that could destroy ships at sea: there were smashing blows of raw energy that could breach hulls; bolts of lightning that could destroy masts; small storms of ice or fire that could drive ships off course or even incinerate them.

Loghain heard him out, and his message to the ships' captains was explicit. They were to make the best possible use of the mages, and after what Jowan had done on their last voyage, he expected that they would be very interested in heeding his commands. It was a pity Loghain would not be there to see it, but he could only be in one place at a time.

Some mages had also been put on the handful of warships in Denerim, and told to leave for Amaranthine at once. If the ships in Amaranthine had already left for Jader, the rest were to follow and join with the rest of the fleet as soon as possible. Some of the smaller ships would patrol the Narrows and shelter at Kilda: the waters there

were too shallow for an Orlesian warship to pursue them. The best way to defeat an Orlesian invasion was to see that it never happened in the first place.

Fergus and Anora, with the Highever troops, headed for the surface at Kal'Hirol, and took the North Road until they could reach the fork toward Highever. Within three days, they arrived at the castle where Fergus had been born, had grown up; and where his parents, wife and child had perished. It was a bittersweet homecoming in some ways, and yet he arrived full of hope for the future.

Anora had visited Castle Highever years before, and remembered some of it. It was a very old place and needed modern improvements, but it was Fergus' home and he loved it. Despite a great deal of work by willing hands, some of the scars left by Howe's attack remained. Anora considered what could be done to erase them entirely. They walked over every inch of the castle, and Anora listened, amused and tender, to the stories Fergus told about it all. Their own chamber was large and comfortable, and the great hall brought back memories of happier times. The view of the Waking Sea from the tower walk was ravishing. The wind was still cold, but Anora enjoyed leaning into her husband's enticing warmth as he pointed out the sights.

"Look!" Fergus gestured toward the city. "They've made good progress on the harbor wall. Most of the debris from the Alienage is cleared away. Howe was apparently going to build a new, modern keep there, but I can't see

spending the money on it."

"I quite agree. Are any elves left at all?" Anora asked.

"A handful of survivors. They've gone to Denerim, I understand, to join the people there. Decimated as the Denerim Alienage is, they'll be glad of them. It's sad, really; they were a part of Highever that's gone forever."

Anora sympathized, but considered that the old Alienage real estate could be put to good use. New housing was needed in Highever, and she agreed with Bronwyn's view that it should be sound, and not hastily-constructed wattle-and-daub shacks that would blaze like torches if there were fire in the city. She had some money of her own, and had enjoyed Nathaniel Howe's description of Nevarra, Cumberland, and Kirkwall. A court of terraced houses, made of stone and roofed with slate, would provide handsome, sturdy, and fire-proof shelter. Such housing would attract prosperous merchants and minor nobles. She would make some sketches, and then turn them over to a reputable builder. Renting them would bring needed coin into the Highever treasury...

"Sank it with a fireball?"

"So they said, Highness."

"Well done, by the Maker!"

Word had come to Cumberland about the adventures of their new Fereldan allies. Warden Jowan, the mage, had sunk an Orlesian warship that had pursued the embassy. It

was the talk of Kirkwall, and an enterprising woman mercenary and her band made a quick journey along the coast to Cumberland to inform the Crown Prince of Nevarra.

Prince Tylus rewarded them better than they hoped, and then considered their news. Warden Jowan had not struck him as a mighty warrior, but he was a mage, and a mage's powers were not a matter of brawn. Two fireballs had sunk an Orlesian vessel and driven away the rest. He had received intelligence that the Orlesians were building and equipping an invasion fleet in Val Royeaux. Jader was expanding its docks. The fleet was no doubt intended for Ferelden, but its power could just as easily be turned against Nevarra.

Being young, brave, high-spirited, and wealthy, Prince Tylus was not so much worried by the news as excited by the opportunity. The Cumberland Circle of mages, home to the Grand Enchanter, was here in his own city. Perhaps it was time for the Circle to earn its keep. A raid here, a strike there; they could pick off the stragglers, and go for the big transports...

When he finally reached West Hill on the twentieth, Loghain found the fortress unprepared and the bannorn in confusion. Frandarel had sent some last minute orders that conflicted with his own. Loghain wasted no time, but summoned the people and made his shocking announcement. Frandarel's commands were now without force, for the man himself was no more.

"Bann Frandarel is dead: executed as a traitor to Ferelden. His bannorn of West Hill is henceforth a royal desmesne. We have reason to believe that the Orlesians, with whom Frandarel was in correspondence, have planned an invasion. We will stop them. Afterwards, we will restore the lands of those honest freeholders unjustly driven from their homes. Stand with me, and we can defeat all who threaten us!"

The effects of Loghain's pronouncement in the wide courtyard of the outer keep at West Hill were both long-term and short-term. People were thunderstruck; not just to hear that their former liege lord was a traitor, but at the idea that the Orlesians, who had savaged this part of Ferelden thirty years before, might be coming back to do it again. Most pledged themselves to support their king, and were comforted and emboldened by his confidence and his legend.

A few people quietly began packing up, determined to flee before the Orlesians were upon them. Some would go south. A group of them decided to travel east to Highever and find a ship to take them to the Free Marches. Among them were some of Frandarel's henchmen: the bailiff, the tax-collector, and one of the under-stewards. They had been complicit in Frandarel's evictions, and knew their days here were numbered. Loghain was busy defending the coast, but in time his eyes would turn in their direction.

Loghain hoped he could put this place in order as soon as possible, since he wanted to head for the border. He had left Bronwyn there, in the cheerless gloom of Gherlen's

Halt, dealing with the crisis, watching the Orlesians like a cat at a mousehole. Or, he thought sourly, more like the mouse peering out of her hole, hoping that the cat was not coming her way. Loghain felt that he should be with her. He missed her, anyway.

And two days after his arrival, the weather changed. Loghain took note of the warming air and the melting snow, fading away into the earth. The ice around the shore was cracking and shrinking. Bronwyn thought that the darkspawn would rise with the spring. If spring came early, Ferelden would find itself with two enemies rather than one. They must be ready. The defenses he was putting in place at West Hill would serve against either foe.

Cauthrien was invaluable, as always; organizing the sappers and setting to work instantly on strengthening the fortress. Previous scouting had revealed where landings were possible, and lookouts were posted. Loghain had mages under his own command, notably Uldred himself, and they would show an attacker no mercy.

Along this stretch of coast, all seemed under control, but Loghain had not forgotten that there was one possible pocket of resistance. Before he left to join Bronwyn, he would have to deal with the nest of Templars – possibly hostile, possibly not – at the Aeonar.

Nathaniel emerged from the Deep Roads into weather that was almost spring-like. While it was pleasant not to

slog through heavy snows, he was well aware that others might also travel more easily during the thaw. All the more reason to get to West Hill and get to work.

Callista looked at the huge, rambling fortress in the distance, and repressed her sigh.

"It's... big."

"And quite old," Nathaniel told her, doing his best to be cheerful about it. "Parts of it were built by the Tevinters; parts were built by the Alamarri. It's nearly derelict in places, but the king is determined to restore it. We can do our part by fixing up our quarters until they're fit to live in!"

Decrepit as West Hill was, it was a roof over the heads of the troops who came through. Wulffe, his elder son, and Corbus Bryland arrived two days later. The young arl was trying to be brave, though he was suffering from the loss of his father and his separation from his brother. He was homesick, in short, and ashamed of it. Fortunately, he had Killer; and his companions were compassionate men, and understood what it was for a young boy to be away from home for the first time in his life, and in such circumstances.

The nobles took council together, including the boy, though Corbus had the sense to listen quietly.

"There's a little keep at Stonehaven we can use as our headquarters," said Wulffe. "At least it's on the maps."

"It's still there," Loghain assured him. "My scouts found it. It's not large, but there are barns, boathouses, and cottages in the area. And there's quite a large structure not

too distant that we might turn to our own use."

Briefly, he confided in them about the location of the Aeonar.

Corbus' eyes widened. The Aeonar! Wasn't it... haunted? Rothgar, in fact, said that aloud.

Loghain had no time for legends. "It's full of Templars, from all accounts, and so anything haunting the place should have been trounced long ago. Given the attitude of much of the Chantry, we might want to be certain that we're not permitting vipers to breed here in the north. Get your men rested, and then we should have a look at the place in a few days."

First they had to scout and scour that section of the coast, looking for weak points. This was labor-intensive work, for the coast here was rippling with little coves and inlets. Nathaniel led some of his soldiers over to some of the nearby islands as well. Meanwhile, Callista made the best of the drafty old fortress. It was interesting as a history lesson, if nothing else. She was very glad she had brought her own sheets.

The twenty-sixth of Guardian was a busy day for the Wardens. As night fell, they began settling down to sleep, with another busy day before them.

Tara was camped in the Deep Roads, two days from West Hill. They had been over this stretch often enough to have found a little side-tunnel, fairly clean; with a crystal-clear pool nearby. The darkness and silence closed in on

them, but there were worse places to sleep. Brosca and Sigrun whispered and giggled, and there quieted down at a look from Tara.

"Some people are trying to sleep," Jowan mumbled, his voice thick, turning on his side away from them, his arm around his tired puppy. He had been crying.

Tara felt for him, but knew he needed time to himself after what she had told him about Lily. Finding out that the girl he loved was an agent of the Chantry, looking to trap a blood mage, had hurt him cruelly. He very likely might never have used blood magic, had he not been seduced by Lily's dreams of escape. Tara had forced herself to tell him everything. Being surprised by the real Lily, face to face, would be even crueler than to imagine her suffering or dead.

Awkwardly, she reached out to pat his back. A muffled snuffle was his only response.

At the same moment, Danith and her people were snugly settled in the hunting lodge perched in the hills. The wind blew across the shutters, making them rattle; the fire crackled as soothingly as an old song. Their supper had been particularly good. Geese did not usually fly south so early.

A distant howling made Niall sit up abruptly.

"Only wolves," murmured Maeve. "No problem..."

"Wish I had a mabari," Quinn muttered, half-asleep.

Bronwyn and the bulk of the Wardens spent a hard day helping the sappers bolster the defenses at the mouth of Gherlen's Pass. Afterwards, there were calls for baths all around, followed by a hearty supper. Most of them were tired, but oddly restless. Bronwyn lingered over a chess game with Alistair; knowing she needed sleep, but reluctant to go to bed. Leliana and Aeron played duets, quietly, but with real pleasure. When they could put it off no longer, they trooped off to their various quarters. Adaia had claimed the red velvet fainting sofa in Brosca's absence.

"It's so pretty," she murmured, nestling down under her silks and furs. "So pretty..."

Siofranni was lying alone in the ruins of a little shrine just off the Green Springs Road, resting her weary feet. A light rain trickled through the bare branches, and down through the stones, but Siofranni had arranged her blanket on a dry spot. She sang softly to herself until sleep took her.

"vir sulahn'nehn

vir dirthera

vir samahl la numin

vir 'lath sa'vunin..."

Her voice tailed off into the sighing of the night wind.

Astrid was holding court among the leaders of her new house in Amgarrack, admiring how well her thaigs were

coming together. More casteless had come to her. Word was getting out about the opportunities underground, and the Paragon's lack of prejudice. There was talk that surfacers would find their way to her, in time.

Also satisfactory were her personal quarters. In some ways they closely resembled her old apartments in the Royal Palace of Orzammar. Just today, a mine supervisor had presented her with a remarkably large and beautiful geode, filled with amethyst crystals. A pretty ornament. Her father had given her one very similar on her twelfth birthday. Astrid set it on a shelf where she would see it last when she fell asleep and first thing on awakening. The glow stones were dimmed, and their low light glittered on the crystals in a hypnotizing way.

"Almost like home..."

The Warden compound in Jader was extensive and formed a rough square: barracks and stables on each side, a gated wall protecting the front, and at the far end a tall building containing a refectory, a council chamber, training rooms, and offices. In one office, a candle still burned. Riordan paced back and forth, unable to find any solution to his dilemmas. The Warden-Command in Montsimmard was intransigent: totally in agreement with the First Warden. Riordan's shadow followed along the wall, like a poor petitioner trying to win a hearing. He paused, a unnamed fear scraping along his nerves. He peered out

through the window, wondering if Bronwyn, Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden, was as troubled as he. At length he decided to turn in, even if he had to drink poppy juice to help him to sleep. It would hardly be the first time he'd needed it.

A thin crescent moon rose long after midnight. With the exception of a handful on guard duty, the Wardens of Thedas were sound asleep when the earth opened to vomit up the Taint.

The world was black, silhouetted in red. Flames and screams rose together; roofs crumbled; towers toppled. Giberling darkspawn filled the streets, hacking and trampling bewildered, sleepy merchants and craftsmen. Inside the houses, children were already shrieking. The light of blue crystal shown down on a broad avenue overrun with blighted monsters. Towering over the rest, ogres smashed open doors and windows and shattered makeshift barricades.

A pair of capering, excited genlocks dragged a horrified young woman along, each holding her by an ankle. Her thin linen shift rode up to her throat, exposing white breasts to the indifferent moon. The skin was torn from her back by cobbles and rubble and broken pots. Her mouth was open in a unheard scream, drowned out by the pandemonium swelling the doomed city. Her head struck the corner of a building house and she went limp, her bloody arms trailing over her head.

Head armored in a great horned helmet, a big hurlock bellowed a command. Darkspawn surged forward, a gate crumpling before them like parchment. They rushed in, shrugging off arrows and spears, scrambling over their dying kin. Another bellow, and an inner door gave way. With a hoarse shout, the darkspawn rushed up marble stairways, hacking at desperate figures in silver armor. The defenders were brave, but hopelessly outnumbered. One was thrown over a gilded balustrade, a brief meteor of courage. Door after door was broken down, silk carpets were dyed crimson with the blood of the slaughtered. More females were surprised; some naked in the act of love, some in innocent sleep, some still wearing jeweled masks and feathered headdresses. They too were dragged away, most precious of all the plunder. A nest would be established in the bowels of the vast edifice. Laundresses and ladies; whores and priests: all were of equal value, since only one thing about them was of any value at all to the darkspawn.

Above them, the Archdemon soared, triumphant. Everything was under its eye. It forged on through the clouds, admiring the work of its minions. The tallest of the towers, a white spire piercing the heavens, might be a focus of resistance. That could not be permitted.

A deep, graceful dive, and a gout of purple flame. The top of the spire exploded into shards, raining down on the shocked defenders. Tiny figures pointed up, squeaking impotently. Another soaring pass, and more of the

spire gave way. The mages inside would not be given the opportunity to fight. Alighting on the ruined stump of the spire, talons dug into the masonry, and another jet of flame erupted down into the interior of the structure, setting everything flammable alight: furniture, clothing, flesh. A quick leap from the crumbling stones, and the thermals caught under powerful wings. The free, ecstatic flight continued, this time to another tall building, highly recognizable despite one of the two great towers lying in ruins. The remaining tower would be its eyrie, from which it would enjoy the spectacle of the slaughter below.

Nightmare visions shattered into thousands of individual vignettes, an aggregate of horror. Fire leaped from street to street, houses collapsed in towers of sparks. The slaughter rolled on, penetrating quiet courts and wealthy avenues, from humble lodgings to splendid palaces.

Darkspawn burst into a lofty sanctum, fragrant with incense. A knot of priests knelt, sobbing out prayers before a golden image. Between them and the charging darkspawn, a band of determined Templars stood shoulder to shoulder, knowing that they were on their way to the Maker's side. What followed was beyond bearing. The Templars hardly had room to swing a blade, as the mob of darkspawn pressed them back. An ogre shouldered his way inside and knocked the combatants aside. Once a Templar was down, he vanished under a pack of darkspawn. Helmets were knocked away, and daggers sawed at

exposed throats. An ogre grabbed one of the Templars and threw him against the wall. Then the gloating darkspawn bounded after the fleeing priests.

"Oh, help me, ser!" screamed one of the women, her habit half torn off. "Don't let them take me!" She clung frantically to a dying Templar, who with his last breath, plunged his sword into her heart.

The darkspawn spread throughout the building, chasing running figures, dragging old women from under their beds, pouncing gleefully on the school children hiding on the other side of the cloister garden.

Another vision superimposed itself: a heavy wooden gate splintering under the blows of an ogre. Darkspawn flooded into a vile slum, packing to bursting with elves. Ten thousand souls dwelt there; ten thousand in a place no bigger than the Denerim Alienage. Decrepit tenements leaned crazily, sometimes touching each other from either side of dirty lanes. It took only a few torches until everything was alight and bright as bright as day. The Alienage's spreading vhenendhal tree crackled like a funeral pyre. Screaming elves rushed out of their burning homes to death from darkspawn blades; other leaped from fifth or sixth story windows, their shabby clothes aflame.

Elsewhere, darkspawn sensed Grey Wardens and pursued them to their compound, drawn by their shared Taint. Here they did not have everything their own way. The Wardens awakened quickly to their peril, organized them-

selves, and fought back fiercely. Their gates were strong; their defenses well-built. Three riders escaped through a concealed postern, dispersing and riding full-out through the city. Two were run down and slain, but one got away, past the city wall, out into the dark plains, galloping hard to the south along the Imperial Highway. Other refugees were already fleeing the dying city, scattered in frantic ones and twos, clutching a pitiful bundle or a wailing child.

Others fled to the docks, just ahead of the darkspawn. Frantic people waved coin and jewels at terrified sailors, who were already casting off, putting distance between themselves and the monstrous menace charging down on them. A few brave souls leaped into the frigid waters and tried to swim for the retreating vessels. Smaller boats were in danger of being swamped, and in one a boatswain wielded his truncheon, smashing at desperate, groping hands.

Others showed more compassion, and once beyond the darkspawn's ability to leap, ropes and ladders were lowered. A few seamen broke out their bows and fired back at the genlock archers. Heads bobbed in the dark water. Some sank beneath the waves, some were transfixed by darkspawn arrows. One ship could not cast off in time and was overrun by darkspawn. Fire blazed up, and the ship drifted through the harbor, a hazard to every other vessel, as every creature on board perished.

Before long the dockyards were entirely clogged with raging, cackling darkspawn, surging at the water's edge,



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firing in vain at the disappearing ships. In the crush, many darkspawn were pushed into the water and drowned, for no darkspawn could swim, and none present was capable of reaching out a hand of charity to another.

Too engaged in the sport of destruction to care about a few boats, the Archdemon landed in a broad courtyard, and amused itself by smashing at the greatest of the palaces with its massive tail. Bored with this after a time, it took to the skies again, flaming along streets filled with those trying to reach the gates. It directed its thoughts at the leaders of the Vanguard.

One of them had found a glorious room within the great palace. On a golden throne sat a beautiful woman. The darkspawn seized on her with a roar of lust, and then dropped her, uninterested, when it apparent that she was already dead, the poisoned wine she had drunk still moist on her rouged lips.



Struggling to awaken from the nightmare, the Wardens' panicked cries echoed through the Deep Roads.

"I hate the fucking Fade," Brosca snarled, clutching her dagger.

Sigrun nodded, shivering. "That was real, wasn't it?"

Ulfa staggered over to the little pool and splashed water on her head. Soren remained huddled under his blanket.

"Sod this," he grunted.

"Maker!" whispered Catriona. "Those poor people!"

"Well, the darkspawn are back," Tara managed shakily, hoping



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she could hold down her supper. There was bile in her mouth.

Jowan stared at her. "Where was that?" Lily sensed his distress and licked his face.

"Wasn't Jader," said Brosca. "I've seen Jader. If the darkspawn are coming, should we go back to Bronwyn?"

Tara thought about it.

"No," she finally said. "If that wasn't Jader — and it wasn't anywhere in Ferelden, I'm sure — then we should go ahead and find Loghain. He doesn't know anything about it, and he needs to."



Astrid awakened from the nightmare and reached immediately for the White Shear on the table by the bed. She took a deep swallow, and pulled herself together.

Sod it! She thought she had more time before the darkspawn crawled out of hiding. What city was that? Minrathous? That would be too good to be true, unfortunately. Better for all of them if the rest of the Blight were to play out far, far away. But weren't the Tevinter priests male?

She took another shot of spirits, drew a deep breath, and slipped on a heavy velvet and leather gown, still thinking. A big, rich city. Richer than Denerim, which was the best Ferelden could boast. On the ocean. Cumberland? Kirkwall? Val Royeaux? Jader?

A grimace. She hoped it wasn't Jader. That would be very inconvenient, if the Blight were still to be on their doorstep. Unpleasantly close to Orzammar. Word had

come that the engineers had made good progress on the new barrier doors, but not that they were actually *done*.

She must look through the new books she had ordered. There were volumes on travel and geography. Some were illustrated. She must see if she recognized anything, and she must do it before the memories faded.

Voices sounded outside her door. Velanna was shrill with stress, as always. Ailill's smooth tenor was rougher than usual. Where were Askil and Falkor. Ah — she heard them now. She must meet with them, and calm them. And then, they would take counsel together.



Leliana's scream split the quiet darkness of the Imperial Suite. Hers was not the only cry. The Grey Wardens fought their way out of the Fade, and knew that their visions were real.

"Maker! Oh, Maker, no! Have mercy!"

Bronwyn fought out of the nightmare, trembling, in a cold sweat. Her own fear threatened to choke her. Beside Leliana, Aveline thrashed wildly, and hit out with her fists. Petra was frantic; Asa frozen with horror, her jaw hanging. Adaia's hysterical shrieks pierced like knives.

"They're all dead! They're all dead!"

A tremendous pounding racketed against the door.

"Your Majesty!" shouted a guard. "Are you under attack?"

Bronwyn struggled to untangle herself from the bed, and fell to the floor, forgetting how high up she was. She hissed with the pain of her twisted ankle, but was grateful to it, for

it was bringing her back to reality like a slap to the face or a dousing of cold water. She limped over to Adaia, wailing on the sofa, and yelled, "Wake up!" and then "I'm coming!" to the door. Then she belatedly realized she was only wearing a shift, and snatched up a dressing gown.

Another crash at the door.

Dear Maker, they're trying to break it down.

"Stop!" she yelled. "It's only a nightmare. Don't knock down the door, I'm just behind it!"

Clutching her gown around her, she flung open the door. The guards were wide-eyed and had their weapons unsheathed. Bronwyn forced a smile — a rather sickly one — and tried to calm the situation. It was difficult, since some of her friends were only now emerging from the grip of the nightmare, and sounded like they were being tortured.

"A nightmare," she explained to the guards. "Grey Wardens are subject to horrible nightmares about darkspawn. This last one hit us rather hard, I'm afraid. Send word down to the kitchens to bring us some hot mulled wine. I certainly need it."

Two of the guards exchanged worried looks. Not all soldiers were idiots, and some had put the facts and speculation together.

"Your Majesty," one of them ventured. "This nightmare... or vision... well... are the darkspawn coming?"

Bronwyn blinked. "The darkspawn we saw are far away, in another country. The city we saw them attacking is not in Ferelden."

That she was sure of. She had not recognized the city — a very large rich place, much greater than Denerim — but she had read books and seen many pictures, and so believed she knew what had happened. And Leliana was crying.

More noise was coming from down the corridor. Anders' wild shout of alarm, sleepy moans of distress from the room some of the men were sharing.

"The wine?" she reminded the guards. "And bring plenty of it."

Siofranni awakened, fingers scrabbling at the stones of her shelter. She curled up on herself, her heart pounding.

Only a dream...

Of course it wasn't. Some great shemlen city was burning. Not Denerim, nor any place she knew. Even the poor flat-ears had been slaughtered.

The darkspawn had risen. Her errand was more urgent than ever.

In the hunting lodge in the Jader Bay Hills, the sleeping Wardens had no idea who the people were, but they witnessed their deaths with shock and horror. Maeve nearly choked on her vomit. Quinn staggered up from his blanket, and drew his sword, flailing about until the point stuck in the low wooden rafters. Trying to pull it free brought him more to himself. Danith was sitting up, her eyes fixed on the fading vision.

"Darkspawn!"

The Avvars stationed with them were immediately

alarmed, and reached for their weapons.

Danith shouted, "Not here! A distant vision!"

Nuala shook Steren out of his unquiet, groaning sleep.

"Then where?" demanded Bustrum.

"I do not know. A great city was in flames."

Niall shook violently, wracked by conflicting emotions. He had hated his share of Templars, but no one should die like that.

"We have to tell Bronwyn!"

Danith dismissed that impatiently. "She already knows. Every Warden in Thedas must know. What place was that? Is it Jader?"

"I don't think so," said Maeve, scrubbing at her face. "It didn't sound like Brosca's descriptions."

"Still, perhaps one of them might recognize something. Quinn, find Bronwyn tomorrow morning."

"I don't want to go back to sleep," murmured Nuala.

"None of us do, *lethallan*. Come. Let us sit by the fire."

Bronwyn was relieved that their three wounded comrades were back among the Wardens, and not in the infirmary when those nightmares struck them. Darach was looking sick, and Hakan very pale. Sten was back among them too, still not at full strength, but more comfortably quartered, with a huge bed big enough even for a Qunari. He, of course, had not shared the dream, and had been rather taken aback at the storm that shook the others.

Zevran, too, was unaffected, and was watching everyone,

tense and eager to understand what had happened. Morrigan looked about the room with a peculiar glitter in her eye.

At the head of the table in the parlor, Bronwyn watched them all. Some were more affected than others. Fenris sat by Carver, his handsome elven face puzzled and uneasy. Carver had quietly told Bronwyn some of his background, and that the Tevinter warrior had issues with magic and mages. He would have to deal with it, because magic was simply too useful to forego. As to her Wardens, the dwarves did not feel the peculiar horror that some experienced in the despoiling of a Chantry. Nor had they seen many dwarves killed. Surely that great city had a dwarven quarter. Either they had been attacked before the Wardens turned in for the night, or there were not a great many dwarves in the city; or their quarter was distant from the origin of the attack, and they had heard the sounds of battle and prudently taken to their heels ahead of the advancing horde.

The elves, of course, were deeply horrified at the fate of those thousands of unfortunates in the Alienage. They had been trapped, without a means of escape. And such a huge Alienage, too...

Leliana was still quite distraught. She had said little since awakening, but had drunk the wine Bronwyn gave her, dressed with less than her usual care, and had followed her to this meeting. Bronwyn would give her a little time, but clearly she knew something.

"The darkspawn have risen," Bronwyn said. "We knew it was only a matter of time. For the sake of our companions who are not Wardens, I will say that we saw a great city under attack. Thousands were slain by the darkspawn. The people seemed taken entirely by surprise. There was a Wardens' Compound, and they fought well, but were attacked by overwhelming numbers. How the darkspawn were able to surprise them so completely is a question yet to be answered. They were not delayed or their presence betrayed, it seems, by a delay getting past the city walls."

Alistair cleared his throat. He looked quite awful. "They must have dug under the walls, the way they got into the Tower of Ishal through the lower levels. If they were far from the Wardens' Compound, the Wardens wouldn't have sensed them. It was a really *big* city, after all."

"Right," agreed Emrys. "They must have been tunneling for months while it was too cold to attack above ground."

Oghren grunted, and poured himself a stiff drink, slopping it on the table. "So... the big question is: where are the buggers?"

Leliana whispered something. Petra, sitting next to her, looked very startled.

"Really?"

Leliana, her eyes hollow with grief, spoke louder.

"Val Royeaux. They have destroyed the Grand Cathedral. So many priests... so many Templars... all dead."

A silence. Anders and Petra looked at each other, consumed with a wicked, vengeful glee. Morrigan noticed it

and smiled slyly. She was fortunately sitting on the same side of the table as Leliana and thus not visible to her. Aveline did see it, and scowled a rebuke. Morrigan merely raised her brows, entirely unintimidated.

Brosca asked, "How far away is that?"

Then everyone began talking at once. Bronwyn put up her hand.

"Did you recognize anyone?"

Leliana nodded. Tears trickled down her face.

Bronwyn persisted, trying to control her impatience. "The woman on the throne was the Empress?"

Another nod.

"And you must have recognized some of the other people as well. I am very sorry if some of them were dear to you."

Leliana's distress restrained the people who otherwise would have been drinking to demise of a hated enemy. It restrained Bronwyn, for that matter, who had to consider how the death of the Empress and the destruction of Val Royeaux would change their situation.

As soon as word of the Empress' death was public, the surviving nobles would fight for power. What about the advancing army, coming east? Had it left Val Royeaux? Had it been destroyed? Had the immediate threat to Ferelden been sidetracked by the darkspawn?

Would an Orlais, torn by civil war, breaking up into petty kingdoms, be a good thing for Ferelden? How would the Orlesians fight the threat of the Archdemon? *Could they?*

There were the Wardens, of course. The headquarters of the order in Orlais was at Montsimnard, which was as distant from Val Royeaux as Gwaren from Denerim. They must already be preparing to defend their country.

What about the Wardens of Jader, the third Warden base in Orlais? Riordan would certainly do his duty. She wished she could speak to him, but very likely he would be gone, even if she were so reckless as to gallop to the city herself.

She continued speaking. "I must ask every one of you to keep quiet about the death of the Empress. It will not help the fight against the darkspawn if every noble in Orlais is busily trying to grab the Imperial crown for himself. Furthermore, while everyone seems to know we see darkspawn in the Fade, allowing people to know the extent of the details might betray Warden secrets."

"We have all dreamed of darkspawn," said Cathair. "This was different. It was... vivid."

"Could it be..." Petra groped for words to express her thought. "Could it be that the Archdemon *wanted* us to see all that?"

"Perhaps as a challenge? A threat? A way to put us in fear? That makes sense," agreed Aveline.

Bronwyn felt they were on to something. "The Archdemon certainly has no particular modesty. It no doubt actually regards itself as a god. All the more reason to be discreet about everything we have seen. Its intentions are malicious. It showed us those dreadful visions to wound

us. Why wound others in our turn?"

Everyone was nodding seriously, while Bronwyn's mind moved on to three very good claimants to the Orlesian throne, not far away in Chateau Solidor. No one must be allowed to get their hands on them but Bronwyn herself. Once people knew the Empress was dead, they would be the target of a thousand ambitious nobles.

"But we are going to fight the darkspawn, aren't we?" Alistair asked, his face deeply earnest. "It's our duty to fight them wherever they are."

Aeron snorted, "What do we owe the Orlesians? All they've done so far is put a spoke in our wheel."

"That was the Empress," said Adaia. She shrugged, glancing in apology at Leliana, "and some of the Chantry. Those elves in the Alienage didn't do us any harm, nor the poor humans. They're the ones who suffered most."

Her words had some effect on Bronwyn, who felt that the vain, vicious courtiers of Val Royeaux had got a well-deserved comeuppance.

"That's true, Adaia," Bronwyn considered. "But we're now in the same position that Riordan was in when he wanted to help us. If we cross the border to go to the Orlesians' aid, a lot of people will regard that as an invasion. And there are troops in Jader who would come out and challenge us, or at least enough of them to harass our supply lines."

"Maybe we can make the people in Jader understand that we're there to help them!" Alistair suggested.

Bronwyn smiled at his naïveté, and then reconsidered. "Let me think about it..."

Riordan saw more of the vision than most. Deep in his poppy-sleep, he watched the horror playing out endlessly until one of his Wardens physically beat him awake. He opened his eyes to a ring of his people ranged around his narrow bed. Fiona was at his side, white-faced but resolute.

"We must go."

There was no question of it whatever. The day was spent in quick preparation, and they were ready to depart just after noon. Riordan himself met with the Marquis' steward and with the Captain of the City Guard.

"Darkspawn have attacked Val Royeaux. There has been a great slaughter. We Wardens are leaving today for Montsimmard, to join with the rest of our order."

Riordan was well-respected in Jader, or they would have laughed him to scorn. They had received no such message. Still, Wardens had their ways of knowing things.

"None of you will stay in the Compound?" the steward asked.

"No. We must all go. Everyone is needed. And we are not the only Grey Wardens in Thedas. If we fall, there are others to continue the fight."

They were shaken already. Riordan saw no point in adding to their fears or creating a panic. He decided not to tell them that the Empress was already dead.

Tara and her party arrived in West Hill two days later, hollowed-eyed and grim. They were recognized at once, and the guards knew that Loghain would want to see them right away.

"Grey Wardens!"

"Brosca and I can handle the report," Tara told the rest. "Go find something to eat."

Loghain was sparring with Cauthrien when he heard them announced. Cauthrien lowered her sword, blowing out a deep breath, and wiped her face. A servant handed Loghain a towel.

Once the sweat was out of his eyes, he saw that the Wardens were Tara and Brosca, whom he particularly liked. He was even about to smile when he saw the looks on their faces.

"What news?"

Neither of them was much for courtly ceremony, and they scandalized nearly everyone present, first by not bowing, and then by addressing the king by his name.

"Plenty of news, Loghain. Some good... some not so good. Is there somewhere we can go?"

"And we're *hungry*," Brosca grunted. Tara turned to scowl at her and the dwarf shrugged.

"What? Well, we are."

"Actually, we are," Tara admitted. "*Really* hungry."

Loghain snorted. "Follow me." He jerked his head at Cauthrien, and she took the hint, walking along with them to the chamber he had taken over as his temporary office.

He and his second were a bit peckish themselves after their workout, so they joined the Wardens as they gobbled bread and cheese and slurped mutton broth. For a brief time, there was no place for lesser concerns. Loghain and Cauthrien were finished long before the Warden, and watched them with some degree of amusement.

Brosca burped her thanks, and said, "Tell him about the darkspawn first, and then give him the good news last."

"Darkspawn?" His attention was instantly riveted.

"No place close," Tara assured him, reluctant to speak of it. "We saw them in the Fade... you know..." She glanced uneasily at Cauthrien.

"Yes," Loghain said impatiently. "I've awakened my own wife from those visions often enough. Grey Wardens can see darkspawn when in the Fade. What did you see? Have they risen?"

"Have they ever!" Brosca exclaimed. "Two nights ago."

"Where?"

Tara shook her head. "We're not sure, but it can't be anywhere in Ferelden, unless you've got this huge city hidden somewhere that we've never seen."

Loghain visibly relaxed. "They were attacking a city? Any guesses which one?"

"Well, it's not Orzammar, not Denerim –"

"– and not Jader," Brosca put in. "I've been to Jader. This was even fancier."

Loghain's heart leaped with hope. Tara saw it in his face and frowned.

"Wherever it was, a lot of innocent people were killed – poor people, old people, little children, humans, and dwarves and elves – and lot of helpless women were carried off to be raped and made into Broodmothers," she said, her voice hard. "So it would really upset me a *lot* if anybody made a big show of being *glad* about it."

Brosca raised her brows at Loghain, and said. "You got any pictures of different cities? We know it's by the sea, because people were swimming to boats to get away..."

Tara said abruptly, "Anybody got a picture of the Empress of Orlais?" She looked up at Loghain. "We're just simple Wardens, and we've never traveled much – "

Brosca protested, " – I've traveled! I've been to *Jader!*"

" – But maybe we might recognize some people. We saw a really big Chantry, too."

Cauthrien asked, "Did it have two towers?"

"Hard to tell." Brosca shrugged, shoving her empty bowl away. "It was pretty wrecked. That sodding Archdeon is *big*."

"I think I have some books for you to look at." Loghain got up and searched through a bookshelf behind him. He thumbed briefly through a few, and then opened one and laid it out on his desk, displaying a woodcut of the Grand Cathedral.

He asked, "Does this look familiar?"

"Maybe," Tara ventured, "but it was the dead of night and everything was on fire and all... messed up."

"You got a picture of a tall white tower?" Brosca asked. "Kind of pointy?"

Cauthrien looked at Loghain, "The White Spire?" she wondered aloud.

The White Spire was the home of the Orlesian Circle of Mages. It was a unique, distinctive building.

Loghain advanced a few pages. "Is this what you saw?" "Yeah," Brosca agreed. "That's it, but it's a lot shorter now."

Cauthrien blew out a breath. "The darkspawn attacked Val Royeaux..."

Tara shook her head. "The darkspawn own Val Royeaux." She lowered her voice. "You wouldn't believe what they did in the Alienage..."

Cauthrien quickly went through the diplomatic archives, and pulled out a flat, rectangular object. It was the official portrait of the Empress, painted some five years before.

"That's her," Brosca said flatly. "She's bought the mine."

Loghain scowled his incomprehension.

"Kacked it, snuffed it, bit the dust, embraced the Stone, cashed in her chips, bid the long goodbye, bedded down for the Big Sleep – "

Tara elbowed her. "Don't!" She said to Loghain. " – Gone to the right hand of the Maker. Maybe. She didn't let the darkspawn get her. She put on her crown, sat on her throne, and drank poison. I've seen worse. She was smart."

Loghain sat back in his chair, trying to control his face. That bitch Celene was dead! That thorn in his side, that mortal enemy of everything he held dear... He wanted to cheer, but did not. Naturally the sight of darkspawn rav-

aging a city would be traumatic to these decent young women. Well...decent young *woman*. Tara was decent, anyway. Brosca was too tough to be traumatized by anything short of ingestion by the Archdemon. They were loyal, brave girls, and he would not wound them by making light of horrors.

On the other hand, he felt like dancing on the Empress' tomb. Not, it seemed, that she would have one. He quizzed them at length about everything they had dreamed.

"We can't tell you everything that happened," Tara said. "We can only tell you what the darkspawn saw. Probably only what the Archdemon *wanted* us to see. We don't know about people who succeeded in hiding or running away. Surely there must be people in cellars or attics or secret rooms. There are always survivors, even in the worst massacres."

"Not *always*," Loghain contradicted. "Usually, though, I grant you. Bronwyn was with you at the time? She couldn't recognize the city?"

"No. We were in the Deep Roads at the time. We did get the news about Arl Bryland from Carver and Jowan before we set out to find you. Bronwyn wanted us to bring you her news."

"And to smackdown the Aeonar," Brosca put in. "She wants that done."

Their report of their findings from their brief raid on the Aeonar were concise but disturbing. Loghain agreed that the Chantry could not be permitted to "experiment" on Fereldan subjects. The place must be cleared out and

the clergy sent on their way... or eliminated. Once empty, Wulfpe's men could use it. Maybe more of the troops. They would have to determine just how deep it went.

Yes, the darkspawn were a concern, but they were far away, and this nearby threat must be dealt with at once.

"And how is the Queen?" asked Loghain, his voice softening almost imperceptibly.

Tara was unsure if Bronwyn had written about the miscarriage, and felt uneasy about telling Loghain something so personal without her friend's permission.

"Working really hard. She went through kind of a rough patch last month, but of course she's pretty pumped now, since she took the Rock."

"She took... what?"

"Roc du Chevalier. She gobbled it right up on the twentieth. Anders and Morrigan had completed scouting it out, and we climbed up one of the towers after midnight – well, I didn't climb – Bronwyn strapped me onto Ostap's back –"

"Sissy," Brosca muttered, grinning.

" – anyway, we climbed up and we got the gate open, and Alistair and the rest charged in and it's ours. Hers. Yours."

A silence.

"Whoa, big guy!" Brosca laughed. "You should see the look on your face!"

CHAPTER 5

AN EMPIRE
CRUMBLES

LOGHAIN FELT TEN YEARS YOUNGER. He made the two crazy girls tell him every detail of the successful assault on the

Orlesian stronghold. The role of magic in the attack was a major one, and Loghain gave it due credit. Bronwyn had used it very, very cleverly: not mere blunt-instrument spellcasting, but incorporating skills and talents that none would even think to guard against. His puppy Amber sensed his mood and ran around his quarters, and then stood looking at him, head cocked, panting happily.

Bronwyn had done well. She had done wonderfully well, and he wished she were here at this very moment, so he could tell her so. Bronwyn had achieved a major strategic triumph. Gherlen's Pass was secured, perhaps forever. With the Rock, they should be able to hold it against the entire Orlesian army — which would not be coming, because of the disaster in Val Royeaux. Val Royeaux was closer to the border of Nevarra. Soon most of the soldiers of Orlais would be headed in that direction.

What they might be invaded by was more likely to be a tide of Orlesian refugees. That could be annoying. It could even be dangerous if some turned to banditry. The troops he was posting up in the Neck should be able to deal with that. Orlesians could go south, north, or west... preferably far to the west. There was no way Loghain would permit an army of Orlesian beggars to invade his country. The chevaliers had been quite bad enough.

And the darkspawn had attacked Val Royeaux. He could not let go of that fact. He turned it round and round in his mind, like a goldsmith turning a jewel this way and that to catch the light. The Empress was dead. The Orlesian Empire had been beheaded with a single stroke.

And the Chantry would be in no position to threaten Ferelden. Not for years... for decades... perhaps forever. Was the Divine even alive? She was frail and old. How could she escape the darkspawn? The haughty Templars, the Seekers, the Knights-Divine and the Knight-Vigilant and the Lord Seeker... they would have more urgent issues to deal with than whether Ferelden was sufficiently compliant.

Like staying alive.

He smirked. Very well. He could deal with the Fereldan Chantry as he thought fit. The Grand Cleric liked Bronwyn. There was little point in recklessly offending her, but nothing that Tara had retrieved in her previous raid suggested that the Grand Cleric knew anything about the foul goings-on in the Aeonar.

To deal with the stronghold, he would want a very substantial force. He could possibly starve them out, but that might take months, and he did not want to divert resources from other tasks that long. From everything Tara told him, it seemed that the Wardens seemed to have absolutely no trouble with attacking a Chantry installation. The dwarves were indifferent to it, and Tara despised Templars. The archer woman... Catriona... apparently hated the Chantry for family reasons. Jowan, too, was with them, and had fled the Circle for reasons of his own, and thus could be expected to harbor some ill feelings. Discreetly, Tara and Brosca gave him the story of Jowan's woes.

"...so," Tara whispered, very indignant. "that awful cow was tricking him all along. She never cared for him a bit. She just wanted the credit for capturing a blood mage, but she's the one who manipulated him into being one!"

Loghain had his own view of the matter. No man liked to know that a woman had used him. "I hardly think he would be grateful to you for telling him."

The little elf looked uneasy. "I meant it for the best. I didn't want him beating himself up forever, thinking he'd got the love of his life tortured and killed!"

"She's a stone-cold bitch," Brosca declared, "and I don't mean that in a good way. That dog of his is worth ten of her!"

That Loghain had no trouble believing at all. Amber believed it, too. Lily was a good dog, almost as good as herself.

"Tell your people to keep quiet about the Empress," Loghain

ordered. "For that matter, while you might say that you know the darkspawn have risen, don't talk about the Chantry or even that you know that the target was Val Royeaux. Everyone would wonder how you got some information, and there could be accusations of forbidden magic. Besides, I don't want information leaking out to the Orlesians. Let them find out that they're leaderless for themselves."

"If you say so."

"I do."

His mind turned back pleasantly to Bronwyn. What a splendid girl. He must try to join her in Gherlen's Pass as soon as possible. With a present.

Immediately Loghain called for a council with Nathaniel, Wulffe, and after consideration, Corbus, telling them the news. Not all of it, but enough to give them a frame of reference.

"That the darkspawn have risen in Orlais might well have already slipped out," Loghain said. "I have no idea how discreet Bronwyn has told her people to be. She must know about the darkspawn. As to the details, Warden Tara sensibly pointed out that the information might be slanted by the Archdemon. That does not mean that what the Wardens saw is not true: it might simply not be the whole truth."

Wulffe was grinning. "Orlais! Serves the bastards right!"

Such was the general consensus around the table. Even better received was the news that Roc du Chevalier was now Fereldan.

"It should be renamed," Nathaniel urged. "The Orlesian name

should be forgotten. Perhaps something in honor of the Queen."

"Good idea," Loghain replied. A very proper suggestion. "Let's all give it some thought."

Everyone was in such a good mood that they were quite agreeable when Loghain broached the subject of the Aeonar. Admittedly, he presented it as a band of rogue clergy, conducting cruel and bizarre experiments on ordinary folk, but it was not too far from the truth, after all.

They moved out the next day. Loghain left Nathaniel in charge, and marched with a company of Maric's Shield, five of the army's mages, and the Wardens. Jowan was brooding, but that was only to be expected.

It was wet and muddy as the snow retreated. Not a pleasant march, but not the worst Loghain had ever endured, either. While they marched, he asked more about the past month. He had had time to read Bronwyn's letter, and he felt she was leaving things out. He was curious about the results of the reconnaissance they had conducted on Jader and Solidor. He learned that the Marquis of Jader had been at Court, and not in Jader, but had been expected by the end of the month. He smirked. Even if the Imperial army had already set out, they would be moving fairly slowly, and news of the darkspawn rising would reach them within days.

"Tell him about the princesses!" Brosca said.

"You tell him! I wasn't there either. That was all Morrigan."

"What princesses?" Loghain asked, in a very good mood.

"Cousins of the Empress!" Brosca loved the story. "Morri-

gan's been in and out of the place, just like the Rock. She flies around, and gets in, and that's how Bronwyn had these perfect floorplans. Anyway, she found this little garden at the top of a tower, and discovered that the Empress was keeping her cousins there. Three girls and a old bronto of a noblewoman who treats them like shit... calls them traitors... kills their puppies and kittens... that sort of thing. Morrigan thought they were – what's the word, Tara?"

"Inspid little fools," Tara supplied. "She said the youngest was well-meaning, though. She let Morrigan in her hawk form come into their solar to get warm, and the other girls went into to a dither, and the old woman threatened to have Morrigan killed and roasted for the princesses' dinner."

Brosca snorted. "Nice, huh?"

"Of course, Morrigan got away..."

"Tell him the good part!"

"And she snatched the old woman's wig off and dropped it over the battlements!"

Loghain's response startled the soldiers in the first ranks.

Brosca grinned, pleased to have made the big guy laugh out loud.

Loghain's laughter died quickly, considering those princesses in their tower. As soon as word got out that the Empress was dead, someone would see their value and grab at them. They could be used as puppets for anyone claiming the Empire. He hoped that Bronwyn had seen that as well. The girls should be captured and held. There

was no need to harm them, but every reason for them to be safe in Ferelden hands. If he trusted the Chantry more, he'd suggest they take orders and enter a convent somewhere near Gwaren.

But the Aeonar was in sight, and he must deal with this business first. He sent out a patrol to secure the cottage where the Templar guards lodged. There were eight there, rather than the four Tara had met previously, but they sensibly lowered their weapons when so instructed. Under protest, of course.

"We shall report this to the highest levels of the Chantry!" their leader complained to Loghain.

Loghain smirked quietly, glad that he had told the Wardens to keep most of what they knew to themselves. These buffoons were perfectly welcome to complain to a Divine... poor old biddy... who was likely either dead, or a ragged fugitive.



The templars were put under guard – separately – to keep them off balance, and scouts moved in toward the prison proper, warned to look sharp for traps. These were disarmed, and were not all that impressive. Nor were there any magical barriers, of course.

Rubble and branches had been replaced to obscure the entrance once more, but that was easily put aside. The greatest problem was the main door, which was locked and barred. The dwellers in the Aeonar had learned that lesson, at least. It took some time to bully the proper signal

out of the youngest of the Templars. Finally, Loghain demanded the information himself, and Desmond could not hold out against the intimidating presence of Loghain Mac Tir, his boyhood hero. One had to strike the door with the pommel of one's sword with three short blows and then another a beat afterwards.

There was a long silence, and they were beginning to believe Desmond had lied. They tried again, and soon they heard a fumbling within, and a clanking of iron.

"What it is?" demanded the Templar on guard. He took in the strange faces and tried to slam the door in their faces. "Intruders!" he bellowed.

"Follow me!" Cauthrien shouted, and Maric's Shield burst into the Aeonar, the invaders breaking into three groups: smaller ones to the corridors on the right and left, and the main body to the central staircase leading down.

There was no hope of stealth, but the inhabitants were at least surprised. A squad of Templars rushed out from the floor below, loudly wondering if the Wardens were poking about again.

"Lay down your weapons, in the name of the King!" Cauthrien declared.

A tall Knight-Lieutenant blustered, "This is a Chantry holding! You have no authority here!"

Loghain parted the soldiers and stood beside Cauthrien. "My authority is in my soldier's blades. Do you want to test it? Is this place worth dying for?"

A pause.

"Is it? Lay down your weapons, *now*."

The six of them actually did, too, and were hustled away. After that, things did not go quite so smoothly.

Some of the Templars put up a fierce resistance. Loghain found plenty of work for his soldier's blades here, and for his own blade, too. The Templars were waving their huge greatswords as if he should be impressed, but as always, it was easy enough to get past slow-moving men with greatswords, smash them down with his shield, and put an end to them on the spot. There was a brutal fight in the refectory, and when Maric's Shield finally prevailed, they were not inclined to be merciful. Some of the Templars battened themselves into rooms and prepared to endure a siege. Guards were posted at the doors, and the troops penetrated more deeply into the fortress. The priests gave themselves up without a fight, but with a great deal of indignant screaming.

Tara discovered that they had only scratched the surface before. The Aeonar went deep, and spread broadly on some of those lower levels. There were cells. There were rooms with familiar instruments of torture and some very exotic ones indeed. There were the restraining chairs and the lyrium irons. A spiked metal cage contained a recently dead young girl, whose body, it was explained, had not yet been removed because the notes on her case were still incomplete.

"Was she a mage?" Loghain asked.

"Oh — certainly!" he was assured. At least... she had shown signs of magic... and her mother was a known mage... and she might have had unusual skills, had she survived the questioning to display them...

"In other words," Tara scoffed. "She wasn't a mage at all. They were just torturing her, hoping that she would manifest magic if under enough stress and pain. If she'd been a mage, she would have become an abomination, and they could have patted themselves on the back for killing her!"

"So she wasn't a mage," Loghain considered. "What crime had she committed?"

"She *was* a mage!" a priest protested.

"What magic had she performed?"

"Well... none. But she might have!"

"A mage who couldn't do magic." Loghain sneered at the knot of priests and brothers. "I suppose you might attempt to stretch your authority to include everyone in Thedas, since all of us might be hiding secret magical abilities. No. It won't do. This girl committed no crime and was no mage, and you imprisoned, tortured, and killed her. It might come as a surprise to you, sheltered as you are, but murder is against the law." He turned to his soldiers. "Lock them up."

"The Divine will hear of this —"

They saw worse things as they descended. They found the pits — the kind called *oubliettes* by the Orlesians — where victims were dropped into stench and darkness to slowly starve to death. A few wretches were found alive,

living off the rotting bodies of those who had gone before. Some were mad; some begged for death.

Of course, none of these were mages, either. You could not leave a mage alone in an ordinary prison, or they would knock the place down or set it afire. A small number of genuine mages were in the Aeonar, under heavy continual guard by Templars draining their mana. These, unhappily, were immediately killed by the Templars as soon as they realized they were under attack. Some of Uldred's army mages looked at the bodies, but did not recognize anyone.

"They might well have been apostates," said Uldred. "Or they might have been from other Circles."

There were quite a few individuals who might formerly have been mages. Apparently the Rite of Tranquility did work on some non-mages. It was now difficult to distinguish who had once been a mage, and who had not. The easiest thing was to ask the Tranquil themselves, who were far beyond prevarication in the matter.

The kitchen was staffed with Tranquil. Tranquil cleaned the floors and the torture implements. They disposed of bodies and performed the rest of the ugly, dirty tasks that were beneath their masters. And in one remote corridor Cauthrien found a row of several cells, each containing a cot and a young girl or boy. They, too, were Tranquil. And naked. Some of them had had their teeth removed. They were quite forthright about the kinds of services they provided, and considered themselves better off than most.

"We are well fed," one of them said, with eerie calm. "And none of us is kept here long."

Jowan and Brosca led a band of soldiers into a quiet hall, which turned out to be where the priests were quartered. In one of the rooms, oblivious the battle surging around her, a young priest was napping. The noise of her door being forced brought her sitting up straight in her bed, clutching a blanket close for modesty.

At the sight of Jowan she screamed.

"A man! A man in the dormitory!" She shrieked inarticulately until Brosca cuffed her.

"Shut up!"

"Lily!" cried Jowan.

The name riveted the attention of both a black mabari puppy and the young priest. The girl stared at Jowan rather blankly, not recognizing the man in light Warden leathers. Then her expression hardened.

"Jowan?"

Brosca smirked. "Yeah, it's Jowan, Your Holiness. Come on, guys," she called to the soldiers in their squad. "Search the room for weapons. She carries a knife on her, so watch it."

Jowan stared at her, transfixed, his feelings in tumult. She looked very different without her habit on and with her hair unbraided and down.

"Get up, Sister," ordered a woman soldier. "Stand over there while we search your room."

"Get out of here!" Lily hissed. "How dare you! The Divine will declare you anathema for this crime."

"Ooo, scary!" sneered Brosca. "Dwarf here, if you haven't noticed. Get up and put your hands on top of your head."

"I'll do nothing of the sort."

"Lily," Jowan said softly, "just do what they say."

A harsh, disbelieving laugh. "You — Blood Mage? You dare tell me what to do?"

Brosca was over at the side of the bed so fast Jowan did not see her move. She caught Lily by the arm and twisted it behind her, and tumbled her out bed. "Not so hard, is it? And that's 'Warden Jowan' to you!"

"You dirty short mouth!" Lily snarled, rubbing her elbow.

Jowan reached down to help her. "Lily, just let us search your room and then —"

She struck out, stabbing him under the armpit. Jowan stared at her, not feeling the pain at first. Lily yanked the dagger back, her teeth bared, while Jowan collapsed to his knees. Growling, the black dog seized the offending wrist in powerful jaws and clamped down, worrying at it as she would a rat.

Lily screamed and tried to shake the dog off, kicking out.

Brosca bounded up onto the bed, grabbed the girl by the hair, yanked her head back, and cut her throat.

"Die, bitch!"

She threw the dying Lily aside and jumped down to see to Jowan.

"Find Tara!" she yelled at a soldier. "He's hurt bad! Come

on, Magic Boy," she cooed gruffly at Jowan. "Do your stuff! Heal yourself!"

"Lily..."

"Drop that arm, Lily, and get over here. See, Jowan? Your nice pup is right here. Shit! You're bleeding like a stuck nug! You over there! Put your hand here and press down hard!" She put Jowan's head on her lap. "Heal yourself, you lazy son of a Duster!"

"I killed her..."

"No, you didn't! I did! That bitch would've stabbed anybody who came in here. Come on, Jowan! We're counting on you! Don't give up now!"

Tara burst into the room running, and swore at the sight of Jowan bleeding on the floor. She dropped to her knees, and immediately cast the only healing spell she knew. It slowed the bleeding, but did not close the wound.

"We should put him on the bed..."

Brosca jerked her head, indicating the dead body and the blood-soaked mattress.

Tara took the hint. "... Somewhere else..."

The soldiers carried him to another priest's room and laid him on the prim little bed. The dog whimpered, getting under everyone's feet. Brosca unbuckled his armor and sliced off his shirt. Jowan chest was very white and nearly hairless, and his skin surprisingly soft. He was half-conscious, his eyelids fluttering.

"That's where she got him," Brosca muttered. "Nasty.

Don't think the shiv was poisoned, though..."

Tara said loudly, "I'm going to give you some lyrium, Jowan, and I'm going to poultice the wound. I need you to think about healing yourself. Just think about it, all right?"

Brosca lifted his head, and most of the potion went into his mouth. A little spilled over the smooth white pillow in a glittering blue stream. Jowan coughed, and then took a stronger breath. Tara slapped on the poultice and tied it down. She put her hand on his chest, and leaned over.

"I'm asking you, Jowan, as your best friend in life, not to die. Not here, Not now. You owe me. Promise me you won't die before I do. *Promise. Remember? 'Never forsake me, and I will never forsake you.'*"

Jowan's eyes did not open, his lips moved in a sad, fugitive smile.

"Promise!" Tara demanded. "Never forsake me —"

A tear trickled from the corner of his eye. He whispered, "*— I will never forsake you as long as I live.*"

The holdouts were eventually killed or captured, and the Aeonar was in the hands of the King of Ferelden. The mages were enraged over the cruelties practiced here, but also elated over the astonishing magical artifacts stored away. Tara found a curious gilt-framed mirror, hidden under a heavy spider-silk drape, and immediately claimed it as part of the Warden's share of the loot.

The Tranquil were put to work, and Loghain did his best

to see they were treated humanely. The thirty-odd surviving Templars were locked away in the dungeons, and the fourteen priests were locked in their barracks, after it was emptied of everything but the barest necessities. The handful of lay brothers were held in an empty storeroom. Loghain's people had had a handful of casualties, but their best Healer was flat on his back, after a narrow escape from death. No one was feeling very friendly toward their captives.

"They're murders and rapists," Tara growled. "You should just hang them all."

"Not *all* of them," Loghain pointed out.

"And some of them are wounded," Cauthrien pointed out.

"Good," snarled Tara. "I hope they *die*. I'm no Healer, and Jowan won't be fit to do anything for anybody for days. Let some of Uldred's people fuss over them if they've a mind to. I'll never forgive myself for not killing that bitch the last time we were here!"

"All the same," said Loghain, sympathizing with her, "we have to deal with the prisoners, and with some degree of justice."

In many ways, it was a very awkward situation. Some of their captives, like young Desmond, were new to the order and had only stood guard duty at the nearby cottage. It would be unjust to treat them all alike. Some of them, yes, Loghain would like nothing better than to hang, but knew it was impolitic, even with the Grand Cathedral in ruins. Besides, it was one thing for his men to be horrified at what they'd seen. If the clergy were executed, word would get out,

and people who had not seen the atrocities here would only understand that he had killed priests and Templars.

Cauthrien, sensing his disquiet, made a suggestion that everyone hated at first and then saw might do.

"They said they were acting under the orders of the Divine – or one of her advisers. Why not let the Divine deal with them?"

"Uh... Ser... I mean Bann Cauthrien... the Divine's probably dead..." Brosca reminded her.

"They don't know that," Cauthrien replied coolly. "Why not put them on some boats, take them to the Orlesian coast, and drop them off? Let them look for her. Maybe they'll find her, maybe not. Maybe something else will find them. Maybe they'll find that that area desolate, and starve to death. Do we care?"

Loghain rather liked the idea, but saw a flaw in it.

"We may soon be attacked by an Orlesian fleet. We can hardly spare the ships."

"I don't mean warships. Some of those fishing boats could carry a dozen or so men in the hold. Hire a few of them. The fishermen would be glad of the coin. Keep the prisoners in chains, and give them a few guards. Have them cross the Narrows and hug the north coast. Drop them off near the northern border of Orlais. Let them walk to Val Royeaux if they like."

"Not the women," Tara said. "We can't make a present of women to the darkspawn."

That was horribly true, but there was another, obvious solution.

"Send them to Denerim – also by fishing boat – with a letter for the Grand Cleric, telling her what they've done. I don't think she'll go easy on them... not now."

Eventually it was agreed that they would send the priests back to Denerim under guard, and that twelve of the worst miscreants among the Templars and brothers would be exiled on one of the biggest of the fishing fleet. Loghain wondered if the fishermen would simply drop them over the side, rather than attempting the long and arduous journey to the end of the Waking Sea. He rather hoped they did.

The rest of the men would be kept imprisoned until more was known of the darkspawn movements. If the darkspawn turned east, the Templars might make themselves useful, or at least fight for their lives.

"Some of them will go crazy without their lyrium," Tara pointed out.

"I never forced them to take lyrium," said Loghain. "I don't intend to feed their habit now."

Within two days of the disaster at Val Royeaux, fast riders overtook the slow-moving Imperial army, telling them the dreadful news of the attack. One of them was a Warden who had been on watch that night. As he had been awake during the attack, he had not seen the vision that so many other Wardens had witnessed in the Fade,

and so knew nothing of the fate of the Empress.

While the situation called for unity and resolve, for quick-thinking and prompt action, the army fell instead into quarreling factions. The command was splintered by debate and petty, self-serving politics. In short, they talked and talked, while camped at the mouth of the River Orne, which flows from Lake Celestine, deep in the Heartlands of Orlais, northeast to the Waking Sea.

The Marquis of Jader was torn with indecision. Obviously, Val Royeaux and the Empress needed their help, but other parts of the Empire needed to be secured as well. The Marquis' brother felt a part of the army ought to continue with the planned invasion of rebellious Ferelden, since he pointed out, with some justice, that the navy had been dispatched, and was now beyond recall. He suggested being entrusted with a third of the chevaliers, which would ride quickly for the border and support the naval operations.

The Marquis knew that once his brother had those men under his command, he himself could forget about ever holding Jader again, for his brother would seize it. Another nobleman proposed that they march back west, but then head to Val Foret, and fortify the city against the horde. This seemed a sensible compromise to many.

Another noble chevalier, bolder and more loyal than the rest, denounced them as poltroons, and demanded that the Marquis lead the army back to Val Royeaux at once. He roused a great number of his fellows, many of

whom had families in the capital, and hundreds of them took up the chant he started:

*"To Val Royeaux! To Val Royeaux!
For the Empress and the Divine!"*

Tempers flared and fights broke out. The Warden who had brought the news was given a fresh horse and then pressed on, south to Montsimnard. A courier was dispatched to Val Foret, and another one southeast to Verchiel. The Marquis pacified his army with great difficulty, and assured them that they would march north on the morrow, but that now they must rest, in order to be fresh for the struggle to come. In his heart, he rather favored the Val Foret plan himself. Val Royeaux must already be lost. He turned in, sleeping fitfully in his grand red and gold tent, in the center of a concentric circle of other colorful tents, and surrounded by long lines of little white tents which sheltered the common soldiers. The lines and circles were illuminated by rows and curves of thousands of campfires. From above, to eyes that saw keenly in the dark, the camp looked exactly like a bright, colorful target.

The Archdemon had had not the least difficulty in following the Warden's trail. As expected, he had led to better sport than one tired warrior. The dragon swooped silently down, down, flaming out of a star-spangled, blue-black sky, incinerating the camp in long blazing swathes. The Marquis of Jader, the center of the archery butt, was ashes before he could fully awaken to brief agony. His brother,

dreaming of holding Jader as his own, died ten heartbeats later. Men ran from their tents, tangled in burning canvas. Some leaped into the River Orne and saved their lives. Some hid under the shadows of the trees. The Archdemon turned in the air, and came back to blast them once more, flying low. A handful of archers had the presence of mind to fire a return volley. The Archdemon largely ignored them, their puny arrows hardly registering as pinpricks. The Archdemon made two more passes, neatly burning a flaming cross into the heart of the Orlesian army. Pleased at the symmetry of its handiwork and the extent of the destruction, it then soared away, back to its Tainted nest in the ruins of Val Royeaux. Over a fourth of the army had been killed, and most of its baggage and equipment destroyed. Of the chevaliers and officers camped in the center, only a score escaped alive.

The Orlesian fleet, under the command of Imperial Grand Admiral, His Excellency the Duc de Verchiel-Dauvin Roget, forged majestically through the Waking Sea, braving the rough waves along the south coast. The professionals among the captains were uneasy about hugging the coast so closely, since it was notoriously full of shifting sandbars. Even at Jader Bay, they would have to be cautious, because of the long spit of sand, called the Horn, that divided the harbor channel in two. It lay under the surface of the water, mostly invisible. Occasionally, at low tide, it was possible to walk out on it for

a long distance – as long as one had not walked out too far to escape the high tides when they rushed back in, fast and rolling. The sensible, professional captains had taken care to have two experienced pilots with the fleet who knew that particular harbor very well.

It was a very impressive fleet indeed: some fifteen warships protecting fifty-four transports filled with men and horses. The Grand Admiral's flagship, *EMPEROR DRAGON*, was a huge, six hundred-ton carrack: a monstrosity with a towering, gilded aftcastle, housing the admiral's sumptuous cabin.

It was four days out of Val Royeaux when they rounded Cape Gris Nez, north of Halamshiral, and found a fleet of sleek, low-slung Nevarran warships lying in wait for them. Fireballs spat toward them, and blossomed out in a storm of devastation.

"We've got to bring those girls in," Bronwyn said, irritable from lack of sleep. Her dreams had been dreadful. "The princesses at Solidor. If we don't, someone else will, and they'll use them to claim the Empire."

"You wouldn't..." Alistair fumbled for words. "I mean..."

"Would I kill them?" Bronwyn asked, exasperated. "Of course not. What have I ever done that would make you think that? Lock them up in comfortable custody, yes. That's pretty much what the Empress has already done. If there is no Empress, then technically one of those girls might be regarded as the heiress-presumptive. Which one, I have no

idea. The safest way is to gather up all three of them.”

Taking Solidor would be a bold move. It would also make Jader very vulnerable. Was it wrong to turn covetous eyes toward that rich, splendid city? Perhaps so. Bronwyn felt a bit like a vulture, picking the bones of the Empire. The Empress was dead, and soon there would be a mad dash for plunder. No doubt a half-dozen pretenders would claim the title of Emperor.

For that matter, the Nevarrans must have seen the vision as well. What would they do? Most likely, they would swoop toward the border, pushing and pushing, gobbling city after city: Churneau, Ghislain, Arlesans... Their own Wardens might be on the march as well, preparing to face the horror in Val Royeaux. The visions had been blurred and confused last night. Perhaps the Archdemon did not want them to have a clear idea what was happening. Perhaps the Wardens were still holding out in their compound in Val Royeaux, selling their lives dearly.

A city like Val Royeaux could not be completely conquered in one night, not even by the Archdemon and the horde itself. There must be pockets of resistance: chevaliers, guardsmen, Wardens, and stout men-at-arms who would fight bravely. People might well have escaped, living to fight another day. And the greatest number of Wardens was not in Val Royeaux, but at their headquarters in Montsimnard, several days to the southeast. A great many women had been captured by the darkspawn, and, according to her readings, in about two

months would be spawning reinforcements for the horde. That was not a desirable outcome.

Which brought her to her own duty. She had denounced the rest of Thedas for leaving Ferelden to its fate. Would she now do likewise, smugly watching the destruction of her hated enemy? All of the arguments she had used against such complacency were still perfectly true. It was stupid and short-sighted to allow the darkspawn to have their way in the Empire. They would only grow stronger and then they would move on to despoil some other land. That land might well be Ferelden. Had she herself not pointed out that the darkspawn cared nothing for borders?

She must prepare to continue her war against the darkspawn, and if the darkspawn were in Orlais, she must prepare to continue it there. They must secure the way into Orlais and she might well consider recruiting more Wardens. She must strengthen their own position. It was awkward, how far their supply lines stretched now. There were obvious solutions.

Jader was closer to West Hill than it was to Halamshiral, the next large Orlesian city. And Loghain felt it would round out the borders of Ferelden so very well. That was true. Solidor protected the Frostback Gate: the gap in the mountains through which the Imperial Highway ran. If they could hold the Frostback Gate, then Jader was theirs, and all that fertile lowland plain as well. It was not a huge amount of new territory, not so big as to be indigestible; but having it

would give Ferelden far better and more defensible borders... and it contained a very fine city. If it were part of Ferelden, it would need a lord. An Arl of Jader? It was certainly large enough to merit the name of arling. It would encompass all of the land from the Frostback Gate east to the Neck and south to the borders of Redcliffe. That would put Cauthrien's bannorn of Haven within its purview.

Bronwyn made her mind stop racing. She was getting ahead of herself. She had darkspawn to fight. She must get rid of her Orlesian prisoners and focus on the real enemy.

But, a sly little voice inside her head whispered, "Wouldn't it be far easier to fight the darkspawn from a base like Jader?"

It was a strong city with plenty of barrack space for her army and wealth to pay her troops. It had one of the best harbors in the Waking Sea and easy access to the Imperial Highway. And the farther into Orlais she carried the fight against the darkspawn, the safer Ferelden would be.

"Solidor first," she told her companions. "We'll take Solidor first. If we're going to move on the darkspawn, we must command the Imperial Highway."

It began with breakfast, because all days began that way. The Imperial Princesses Celandine, Eponine, and Eglantine were completely ignorant of all events that had happened in Thedas over the past seven years. They knew nothing of political economy or diplomacy or even arithmetic more advanced than addition and subtraction.

Their education had been limited to the artistic, the religious, the innocuous. They could all play the lute, embroider beautifully, and recite large portions of the Chant of Light from memory. No expense had been spared by the Empress to make them at once exquisitely accomplished and profoundly incompetent. Between their *gouvernante*, the Comtesse Coquelicot, and her crony, Revered Mother Rictrude, they not only were without the skills to intrigue for the Empire or rule it; but they did not even know how to dress themselves, or make tea.

However, amidst the congeries of little known and useless facts they were permitted to know, they had some concept of the classical dramatic unities.

The unity of action: a play should have one main action that it follows, with no or few subplots.

The unity of place: a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place.

The unity of time: the action in a play should take place over no more than a single day.

The most dramatic event of their lives happened at Chateau Solidor, in a single day, And they were so absorbed in the event as it pertained to them, that they were oblivious to any possible subplots.

After their usual breakfast of porridge, cream, and honey, the princesses retired to the solar for the usual pursuits of reading romances, embroidering yet more cush-



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ion covers, and making music. The Comtesse did not join them at once, as she was no doubt ranting at the steward and laying down the domestic law – in the most insulting manner possible – to the housekeeper. She was more unpleasant than ever, now that she was forced to wear her second-best wig, which was black instead of auburn. The girls cherished the few moments of privacy before she arrived, talking quietly about the shreds of gossip divulged by the servants. Isolated as their tower was, they heard nothing going on in the rest of the castle.

Celandine whispered, "I know now why Lisette is no longer here. I was told that she and the footman Auberon engaged in *'illicit intercourse.'*"

"Whatever that means," shrugged Eponine. "I feel certain that she would not be sent away simply for talking."

"But what could –"

"Oh, look!" cried Eglantine, "The hawk is back!"

"Don't open the door, Eglantine," Celandine complained, "It is too cold!"

Eponine shuddered. "And the bird will get in again!"

Ignoring them, Eglantine opened the door to the little garden.

"Bonjour, Monsiegnieur Faucon!" A raven fluttered down to the dormant rosetree and cocked its head. "And a raven! I have never seen one so close!" She walked to the battlements to have a look at the view, streaked in the east with rose and gold, and then gasped.

"An army!"



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The other girls hurried out to see. Over the tower there was a boom of thunder and then a dazzling shower of blue and gold sparks. Eglantine clapped her hands.

"How beautiful! And in our official colors, too!"



Bronwyn urged her horse forward, well within bow-shot, having decided to explain why a prudent man would indeed lower the drawbridge and admit her and her host. She gave a signal, and a missile was fired from one of their portable trebuchets. It exploded above the north wall with a terrible thunder and a rain of lyrium-enhanced fire. Her troops had come up the road in the night and surrounded the castle. The captain of the castle guard was gaping down at the forces arrayed against him, which had appeared as if by magic. The man was very surprised and seriously frightened by the demonstration of their explosives. Bronwyn smirked up at him.

"Hear me!" she shouted. "I am Bronwyn Cousland the Dragonslayer, Queen of Ferelden. As you see, we can shatter your gates with ease. We can blow your castle apart. If you do not surrender at once, I will order my engineers to begin the demolition of this castle, and when the gate gives way, I will order my soldier to sack Solidor and put the defenders to the sword, to the last man, woman, and child. If you lay down your weapons, I will show you mercy."



"What is going on?" wondered Celandine. "Is it the Mar-

quis of Jader?" She had always thought he must be handsome, though she had never seen his face. His fine, tall, person and his noble bearing suggested that under the mask was a being of godlike beauty.

"I do not see his arms," said Eglantine. "The chevalier leading them is in red armor. How striking!" She then saw Alistair, and remarked, "Look at the young man on the bay horse. He is quite comely."

"He is not a gentleman," Celandine reproved her. "He wears no mask. You should not look at him. Look at the fine chevalier in the red armor instead! Is he not splendid?"

Eponine leaned over the battlements and waved at the troops with her white silk handkerchief. "The helmet is very charming and fanciful, with the wings going up like that. And the mask is part of it. That is clever. I wonder who he is?" She sighed. "I wish he would call upon us. It would be so diverting."

Celandine shook her head. "The Comtesse would never permit it!" She took out her handkerchief and waved, too. "Come, Eglantine, wave at the chevalier!"

"I wish we were not so high up," Eglantine complained. "I wish we could hear their conversation!" She waved her handkerchief with great enthusiasm. "Bonjour! Bonjour! Maker bless all you brave soldiers!"

Ser Norrel squinted at what appeared to be white flags waving from the highest tower. "Are they surrendering?"

Bronwyn scowled at the hapless captain. "Ser Captain, are you *mocking* me? Are you treacherously pretending to surrender while scheming to attack?"

"No! No!" He craned his neck at looked up at the tower. "It is their Imperial Highnesses. They must think you have come to call."

"I have come to call," Bronwyn said coldly. "The Princesses have offered their surrender, and I suggest you do not delay me in accepting it." She waved back at the princesses, who giggled with excitement.

"Gentlemen," ordered Bronwyn, looking back at her knights and Wardens. "Bow to the Imperial Princesses. They have surrendered Chateau Solidor to us." There was some laughter, and the princesses were duly saluted. Bronwyn glared at the captain. "Lay down your arms. The next explosion will destroy your gates."

An aged woman in a black wig and lace mask appeared on the top of the gate by the captain, and shrilled out, "What is going on? What was that noise? How dare you! Do you know who I am?"

Bronwyn eyed her without respect. "The question, Madame, is: Do you know who I am? Enough of this trifling," she said to Haglin. "Give orders to begin the bombardment." She turned her horse's head.

The captain called, desperate. "I must defend Their Imperial Highnesses! Will you give me your word that they will not be harmed?"

"I give you my word. I have not the least desire to harm them. They will be treated with the honor their rank demands. Surrender, and I will spare them, and you and your men. Any who resist will perish."

"You fool!" screeched the Comtesse. "Shoot them! Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!"

"— And I believe that I may have to begin with that haridan," said Bronwyn. "Do shut her up."

The Comtesse's jowls quivered under the lace mask, and she rushed away.

"Good riddance," snorted Bronwyn. "And now, Ser, there is the matter of your capitulation..."



"Oh! Oh!" cried Eglantine. "The gate is opening! Oh, I do hope that we are permitted to meet our guests!"

"Should we put on our masks?" Eponine dithered anxiously. "Would it be proper to receive visitors without them?"

"Madame la Comtesse will inform us if we are to come down," said Celandine. "Of course we shall wear our masks once we leave our private chambers."

There was a noise in the corridor outside the solar. Someone was rushing up the stone steps. The angry voice of the Comtesse made the girls fall silent in dread. A moment later, the door was thrown open, and a pair of frightening brutes with wickedly sharp daggers burst into the room, followed by the Comtesse.

"Kill them!" she screamed, pointing at the shocked prin-

cesses. "They must not be captured!"

A chaos of shrieks rose up, and the princesses ran outside to the little garden and huddled together, on their knees.

"No! No! Oh, ser, spare us!"

The Comtesse's henchmen lunged through the door of the solar, daggers raised.

... and were frozen in place.

The Princesses blinked, not understanding what they were seeing. The Comtesse stared, and then uttered a hoarse cry.

"A mage! A filthy ma —"

She too, was frozen.

The raven was not to be seen. In its place was a tall and handsome man with blonde hair and a winning smile.

"Much more the thing. Too much screaming and knife-waving. Calm down, calm down, Anders is on the job..."

The cup of wonders was not yet full. The hawk dissolved, transforming into an exotically beautiful woman, who fixed yellow eyes on them: eyes full of amusement and contempt.

"Well, well, what have we here? Three little princesses all in a row?"

The girls stared at her, terrified. Yes, they were just as terrified of her as they were of the Comtesse, but the Comtesse was cruel and repulsive in appearance. This woman looked like she might be cruel, too, but she was also lovely. She reminded them a little of their cousin the Empress, and how she had smiled at them while describing the

executions of their father and mother.

And charming as Anders could be, the appearance of the two mages, as they shifted from bird to human, was in no way reassuring. Mages were evil: they were the source of all the world's sin and sorrow, and these were free and unhampered by the Chantry; working their magical arts on people and changing into birds, and —

"Oh!" cried Eglantine, racked with humiliation. "I invited you into the castle!"

"Eglantine!" Eponine scolded. "This is all your fault!"

Celandine sobbed, "You foolish child!"

Their nurse had told them that evil creatures like demons and mages could not enter one's home unless invited. As long as you did not proffer an invitation, your home was safe. The wicked mage had tricked Eglantine, appearing as an innocent bird, and Eglantine had brought disaster on them all.

More people were coming. Soldiers. Soldiers who were obviously not Orlesian. They did not seem surprised by the frozen assassins, nor by the frozen Comtesse, who looked very fierce, her face distorted with murderous rage. The soldiers were rough and smelly. They did not bow. In fact, they paid almost no attention to the girls at all.

Anders said, waving at the unmoving figures, "They were going to kill the princesses, just as the Queen suspected. Better lock them up. She might want to question them."

"What has happened?" whispered Celandine. "Who are

these people?"

Anders beamed, and then to his disappointment, noted that his smiles were wasted on her. "The castle has been taken by Queen Bronwyn. She won't hurt you."

Eponine was bewildered. "Who is Queen Bronwyn?"

The soldiers lugging out the stiffened prisoners looked at each other with some amazement and at the girls with derision. One made the quick gesture that suggested the girls were half-wits or insane. The rest shrugged. Morrigan gave a harsh laugh like a hawk's cry.

"The Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer, The Queen of Ferelden. The Warden Queen. The Red Queen. The Dragon Queen —"

"— and Andraste's True Champion!" Anders declared, grinning.

The girls were more and more bewildered.

"Did she marry the rebel Maric?" faltered Celandine.

Both mages laughed, frightening the princesses even more. At that point, Alistair arrived.

"Got the situation in hand I see," he said. "The ladies are all right?"

"They're fine, Alistair," Anders assured him, "just a bit nervous around the scary mages! Mwah-ha-ha!" He wagged his hands in mock threat, and the girls shrank back, squealing. Morrigan snorted in disgust.

"Whimpering and witless fools," she sneered. "Look at them, huddled like sheep! Hardly worth the effort to save their worthless lives."

Alistair remembered why he had never liked Morrigan. "Maybe they wouldn't be frightened if there hadn't just been an attempt to kill them, and if you weren't scaring them!" he snapped. Then he made a point of giving the poor girls the bow he had learned to give Arlessa Isolde years before.

"Your Imperial Highnesses. It's an honor to meet you. The Queen will send for you very soon. For now, please stay here in your apartments. No one is going to hurt you or —"

"Ser... Alistair?" ventured Eglantine.

"Not 'Ser," said Morrigan, with mocking emphasis. "'Tis *Bann* Alistair. *Bann* Alistair Fitzmaric of Stonehaven!"

He reddened. He should have introduced himself as a Warden from the first. Now *Morrigan* had mentioned that *stupid* title. "Yes, *Bann* Alistair, I'm afraid."

"You are noble!" said Eponine, relieved. "You are a gentleman!"

"Well... yes."

Celandine gushed, "Pardon our confusion as to your rank. You are not masked." Then she realized that she was not masked either, and flushed. It was all very improper.

"No. Don't have a mask," Alistair mumbled. "We never wear them in... er... *Ferelden*." He grimaced, and said to Anders, "They're scared of you. Maybe you and Morrigan should go, and I'll explain what happened."

Morrigan shrugged. "With pleasure!"

"No!" cried Eglantine. "She cannot go if you stay!"

Alistair, miserable and red-faced, stared at them in confusion. Morrigan was offended and Anders amused.

As if it were obvious to the meanest intelligence, Eglantine explained, "We cannot possibly speak in our private apartments with a man unrelated to us and with no chaperone present."

Eponine's eyes were huge. "It would be a scandal!"

"We could be executed!" Celandine solemnly assured them.

"Hmmm." Anders smirked. "There are three of you. Can't you just... I don't know... chaperone each other?" Alistair was silent, dizzily contemplating a worldview in which Morrigan could be regarded as a chaperone.

"Or we could all just *leave*," Morrigan hinted, bored.

"Right," said Alistair, rather glad of the suggestion. Young ladies — especially pretty young ladies — made him nervous. "We'll all just leave. Now. The guards at the door are there to protect you. Nobody's going to bother you. Just stay here. We'll let you know when Bron — Queen Bronwyn's ready to see you. Your Imperial Highnesses," he remembered to add.

He bowed again, backing away, and tripped over his own feet. The mages laughed heartlessly. In a moment they were all gone, shutting the door of the solar behind them.

"What an odd man," remarked Celandine.

"But a noble," Eponine pointed out.

Eglantine nodded, her eyes dreamy. "And *handsome*! Even without a mask!"

"They are pretty fools," Morrigan said to Bronwyn, with a shrug. "Very nearly mindless. They were horrified at being exposed to the impurity of *mages*, and equally horrified at the

idea of being left alone with our bold and lecherous Alistair — "Hey!" Alistair protested.

" — without a *chaperone*," Morrigan finished, relishing the sarcasm. "One would think that after their last chaperone attempted to murder them, they would have had enough of such creatures!"

"I'll have Leliana deal with them," Bronwyn said. "She should know all the protocol rubbish they're accustomed to. Or I'll find a reliable female officer to escort them. I want them out of here as soon as possible. They need to be sent east, out of any pretender's reach."

So she sent for Leliana, though she had more important things on her mind than three silly girls. A long conversation with the captain of Chateau Solidor had explained some of the reason for the collapse of all resistance.

The Grey Wardens of Jader had come through two days before, and Riordan had informed the captain of the rising of the darkspawn and the attack on Val Royeaux. The gravity of the situation was not lost on the captain, and he had been uncertain what to do. Riordan had also told the Marquis' steward in Jader about the attack. Word was out, and every man in the garrison here had heard the news. They were afraid, now that the Blight was here in Orlais, and not far away in enemy country. Many wanted to go home to their families. Bronwyn pressed for news of Riordan, but the captain knew little.

"The Senior Warden said he would go to Montsimmard,

to the head of the order in Orlais, and join forces with him. It will take them at least seven days, even if they travel fast."

It was less and less likely that the Orlesian invasion force would attack Ferelden. If no one else informed them of the disaster, Riordan would eventually meet the army. It could not attack the eastern border when the capital of its own country was being ravaged by the darkspawn. Interestingly, the captain said nothing of the Empress. Bronwyn danced about the issue, but apparently Riordan had not given him that detail, perhaps hoping to prevent a panic.

Well, the news would get out eventually, and panic there would be. Bronwyn was just as glad to keep it quiet for now, reducing the value of the young princesses.

The garrison had been disarmed — stripped of their armor, too. Bronwyn planned to have them escorted west along the Imperial Highway, then have them told to keep marching. If they tried to double back, they would be killed. The next sizable city was Halamshiral, two days away. No, more like three, if the defeated Orlesians had no boots. By the time they reached Halamshiral, news should have arrived about the events in Val Royeaux. The Orlesians would have better things to do than try to retake Solidor.

"We'll keep the officers and the Comtesse," she said to Alistair. "We might get ransom for them. The woman might have some useful information for us, too, once she gets tired of bread and water. For the rankers, it's best to simply let them go. I don't want to feed them."



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Leliana arrived, very cheerful from her examination of the castle, and Bronwyn gave her her new assignment.

"I'd like you to take charge of the princesses for now. Have them come down so I can speak to them. No masks. That's an Orlesian custom I can't abide, and they need to learn to do without them. They seem to think they need a chaperone, even though they are hardly children. Win their confidence and find out what you can about them."

"Nothing easier!" Leliana beamed, rather pleased at the idea of being entrusted with such a task. Three princess, locked in a tower, would be delighted to have the company of a minstrel. The romance of the situation appealed to her greatly. "I shall go up to them at once!"

Solidor was a fine castle, though nowhere near the size of the Rock. It was an imperial possession, and had often been used as a prison, as it was now, for distinguished but inconvenient individuals. Bronwyn set about organizing a garrison of her own, and discovering what weak points this castle, so serendipitously fallen into her hands, might have. While she was busily giving orders and listening to reports, Leliana arrived with the princesses. Each was exquisitely pretty in a frail, white-skinned, fine-boned way. Each was gowned in sumptuous velvet: blue, gold, or rose. They wore elaborate pearl diadems to hold back their pale-gold hair. They were presented by Leliana, and they made Bronwyn elaborate curtsseys.

They were clearly very much afraid of her.



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Bronwyn realized that she might be intimidating to such sheltered individuals. She was in armor. She towered over them. On the other hand, they were a little old to be so childish. The youngest might not yet be twenty, but the two older princesses were older than Bronwyn herself. Perhaps it had suited the Empress for them to be timid and ignorant, but they had also been pampered with comforts and luxuries and the endless labor of many servants' hands. Bronwyn was not going to provide them with such a lavish lifestyle. Not when she herself often had to sleep rough out of doors or on stone in the Deep Roads. She looked down on these feeble, inbred specimens, the offspring of cousins, of uncles and nieces, and saw little to respect.

To be sure, she could not fully comprehend what a strange figure she cut before the Imperial princesses. She was tall and imposing, certainly, and her red dragon armor was splendid; however, the princesses had never seen any woman with any pretense to gentility appear even among other women with her face unpainted. That she was also unmasked – and demanded that they, too, be unmasked, even in the presence of men and commoners – seemed rather indecent. They might not grasp her courage and daring, but they noticed the dirt under her fingernails and her untidy hair. Eglantine thought her face might be pretty, with some lip rouge on her pale mouth, and with her eyebrows properly plucked thin and the horrid scar covered up. Her eyes, though, were terrifying:

piercing and hard, and a bright, bright green that made Eglantine think of snakes and poison... or... somehow... of dragons. Of course, she was altogether too big. Her feet and hands were like a man's. They could see the sinews of her neck, unfeminine and muscular. She did not look like a Queen. She did not even look like a lady. She looked like she had been working in the fields, like a peasant woman.

Then, too, her retinue was composed of uncouth and sinister creatures... The big dog, of course: almost a cliché in itself. There was a huge giant of a man with grey skin and lavender eyes. There were elves, armed and daring to look them straight in the eye, some smiling, some grave and disapproving, like the tall, white-haired one. What was that look directed at them by that little elf girl? Insupportable impudence! It was unnerving. A crude stone figure stood in a corner, as tall as the giant man. The princesses wondered what it was, because it was the ugliest statue they had ever seen. Then there were the two mages that had tricked them, boldly bearing their staffs for everyone to see. Dwarves loafed about, mightily at their ease. The armed human men — and women — about the queen wore dirty, stained armor and the grips of their swords and daggers looked greasy and unclean. Not one of them looked like a noble chevalier, aside from Bann Alistair, and he was not very clean either.

Still, this Queen Bronwyn did not speak to them unkindly, though she did not use all the ceremony that was their due, as they were Princesses of the Imperial line

of Drakon Kordilius, and she a mere upstart queen of a little barbarian realm.

"Ladies," Bronwyn said briefly. "You have nothing to fear from me. I shall see that you are protected. In a few days, you will leave Chateau Solidor and take up residence in another of my strongholds. You may each select a servant to take with you, and you will be provided with a wagon for your possessions. An escort will be assigned to you."

They were too cowed to ask her their thousand questions, and Bronwyn was too busy to coddle them, so she gave them a curt nod of dismissal. "Warden Leliana, take the ladies back to their quarters, and help them begin preparing for their journey."

Frightened into speaking, Eponine asked, "Our escort will not contain... mages, I trust?"

The Queen frowned, displeased, and Eponine quailed briefly.

"What? Like those *mages*," Bronwyn said slowly, her green eyes terrible, "who saved your lives not two hours ago? You object to their presence. Is that not correct? Am I to understand that rather endure the presence of *mages*, you would have preferred to have been gutted by a pair of thugs at the behest of that vile old women in the dungeons?"

Embarrassed and confused by such a response, the princesses blushed and lowered their heads. Eglantine tried to sort out her own feelings. Of course she was glad not to have been killed, and that the Comtesse was in the dungeons was wonderful news; but it was very improper for a lady to use



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the word 'guttled.' And the mages were still... mages...
Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "Take them away, Leliana. I'm busy!"



IMPERIAL PRINCESS EPONINE OF ORLAIS



THE RED QUEEN

CHAPTER 6



THE FLEET THAT HAD TO DIE

THOSE REFUGEES WHO HAD ESCAPED VAL ROYEAUX BY SHIP BEGAN LANDING UP AND DOWN THE COAST WITHIN A DAY OR TWO. Not all of them were alive. Plenty of boats capsized in the panic, spilling their burdens into the cruel sea.

The first of the bodies washed up the following morning: the remains of a beautiful young girl who floated in, breasts bared to the empty sky, while gulls screamed overhead. Soon bodies drifted to shore all along the coast, and were eagerly looted, both by the people of the local fishing villages and by the denizens of pirates' coves.

A number of heavily-laden boats reached the Port of Lydes by sunset of the following day, and the hideous news began to spread like a cancer on the land. By the next day, boats were landing in Val Chevin to the north. It took six days for the larger ships to put in at Cumberland, and the people aboard them were starving. Along the coast, news from the sea met news from the shattered army, and the panic grew steadily. A great many of the most powerful

nobles had been at Court in Val Royeaux, and their vassals and stewards at home would eventually begin to consider how the world had changed.

A handful of mages had survived the destruction of the White Spire and managed to fight their way out of the city. They had not had time to dress in proper robes, and had picked up cloaks and valuables from the dead and dying. There were too many people crowding on the roads for anyone to care about a few more shabby fugitives. Enchanter Rhys tried to think about where they could go.

"We can go anywhere!" a red-haired girl burst out eagerly. "The Phylactery Chamber was destroyed! Nobody knows we're alive. Nobody knows we're mages."

"Wherever we go," Rhys said, "I suggest we get as far away from the darkspawn as possible."

They followed the coast north to Val Chevin, and then took the Northwest Highway. Maybe Andoral's Reach would be far enough. Maybe they would go even farther. Soon, all the Templars in Orlais would be hurrying in the other direction.

The Divine, Beatrix III, had actually survived the darkspawn attack, defended by faithful Templars, one of whom cast aside his weapons and carried her to safety on his brawny back. A great many brave men and women died to cover her flight through the Cathedral complex to the entrance to an escape tunnel that ran under the city. Most fortunately, it had not been discovered by the dark-

spawn. They emerged from the tunnel mouth near the River Royeaux at a considerable distance from the walls. Downriver, the night sky was orange and grey above the tortured city. It was raining; a sharp cold rain that penetrated the Divine's thin night shift and even the heavy cloak someone had wrapped her in. No one knew, until she was untied from the exhausted Templar, that during the terrors of their flight, her heart had quietly failed.

"What shall we do?" sobbed a young priest. "Revered Mother," she asked Mother Dorothea, "What shall we do?"

That sensible woman and experienced politician, Revered Mother Dorothea, was too weary for speech. It had been all she could do to round up the Divine and a few companions. As they were escaping, just ahead of the darkspawn, a pair of priests had run after them screaming, begging them not to shut the concealed door in their faces. If they had waited for those women, the darkspawn would have seen them and caught them all. Mother Dorothea had given the order to shut and bar the door, and now she could not stop seeing those women's faces; could not stop hearing their screams.

The ranking Templar, Ser Evangeline, stepped forward to lead them, young as she was. "We shall find the nearest shelter and rest," she said, calm and decisive. "Pursuit tonight is unlikely. The darkspawn have plenty to occupy them in Val Royeaux."

"What of Her Perfection?" asked a tearful lay brother.

"We shall wrap her in the blanket and take turns carrying her. We must give her a decent pyre when we can. Yes, we shall rest, and then follow the river north to Belle Fourche. The roads divide there. By then, a plan should have come to us."

"Someone must take up the mantle of the Divine," whispered Mother Dorothea's secretary. "Someone must speak for our Lady Andraste."

"That person must be properly elected by a duly assembled Sacred Conclave," Dorothea replied quietly.

"In these disordered times —" the secretary urged.

"Stop. I do not wish to hear it."

She had given the order that had killed her fellow priests, and at the moment, she hoped she would never be called upon to give any orders ever again.



Later that day, when two fleets met off Cape Gris Nez, three Orlesian warships were sunk outright in the first moments of the battle. Five transports joined them under the waves, and four more were soon burning. On the deck of the EMPEROR DRAGON, the admiral's personal priest was instructed to pray. Indeed, she would have prayed, ordered or not, for they were in terrible danger.

The Nevarran vessels only numbered twelve, but they wreaked havoc, not by boarding and fighting like honest warriors, but by the foul and treacherous use of magic. Orlesians ships would try to come to grips with the enemy, but the Nevarrans evaded them, and the mages on board

— who could be seen quite clearly, though they were out of bow range — continued to rain the wrath of the elements on the ships of the Empress.

There was no defense against the fireballs the Nevarrans launched at them. Not all of them struck their targets, of course. Some were timed badly, and exploded in the air as the ship dipped into the trough of a wave. Some struck the water and fizzled out. Some missed entirely.

"Pursue them!" shouted the Grand Admiral. "If we can get close enough, we can board them and slaughter them! We outnumber them ten to one!"

The flagship's captain stared at the admiral in disbelief. The man clearly had no clue about what was and was not possible in a sailing vessel. Emperor Drakon looked impressive, but the elaborate aftcastle had made it top-heavy and hard to handle. He had previously tried to talk to the Grand Admiral about dismantling some of it once the problems manifested, but that suggestion had not exactly been well received.

Besides, the problem with pursuing the enemy was that a closer distance made the Nevarran mages' aim that much better. Some of the Orlesian captains understood this, and considered escape their own option. They raised more canvas and ran before the wind, their larger area of sail enabling them greater speed than the smaller Nevarran warships.

"Come back, you cowards!" the admiral sputtered. "You will be flayed for this betrayal!" He saw a Nevarran ship coming up on the port side, and shouted. "That one! Attack that one!"

"Monseigneur," the captain objected, "we cannot turn so quickly..."

"I decide what you can do! Turn and attack! Chase the coward!"

Under the captain's orders, the EMPEROR DRAKON began a slow, ponderous maneuver that would eventually cause their course to intersect with that of the warship. In some ways, it was not a bad idea, since they would no longer present a broadside target to the enemy. However, the sea was thick with ships, and sudden changes of course by a few in the center of the fleet raised the prospect of collisions.

"Too slow! Too slow!" the admiral raged. "Turn faster!"

"Monseigneur, we *cannot* turn faster..."

"You!" The admiral pointed to a random sailor. "Obey me! Take the wheel and turn this ship!"

When the sailor glanced first at his captain for confirmation, the admiral lost his head completely, and ordered one of his own bodyguards to take the helm. The man-at-arms gripped the unfamiliar wheel uncertainly, but pushed it manfully in the direction the admiral indicated. The captain burst out into a stream of objections, and was knocked down by a chevalier for his impudence.

A strong gust caught the sails. The ship rolled, then heeled. The Grand Admiral fell sprawling, and looked around stupidly, trying to understand what was happening. The priest wailed out appeals to the Maker.

There followed a sickening lurch, and waves splashed over the port side. The captain lunged at the wheel, and shoved the

man-at-arms aside, trying desperately to save the ship.

"Ease the sails!" he shouted, hoping to spill some wind and right the dangerous tilt.

It was too late. Orlesians watched in horror and Nevarrans in delight as the flagship slowly rolled over, the massive weight of the aftcastle weighing it down. Sailors leaped into the water, swimming for their lives. Some of them were picked up by other Orlesian vessels. The chevaliers, the servants, and the horses were not so fortunate. None of the elven servants knew how to swim — though one quick-witted elf clung to a spar and survived — and the horses were locked in the hold, and perished miserably.

It had been hinted to the chevaliers that wearing plate armor at sea was not a particularly wise move, but such advice had been dismissed as poor-spirited. Now the chevaliers sank like stones. Once in the water, they vanished without a visible struggle, and were lost.

More ships were coming under attack, and they tried to break free of the attackers. They were not well positioned for it, because the admiral's orders that they hug the coast put them close to the lee shore, with the wind from the north pressing them ever closer to reefs, rocks, and the shifting sands. The Nevarran captains were perfectly aware of this, and showed no mercy. The ships that had fled most quickly were the survivors.

Others were burned or blown apart. Some ran aground, their keels mired on sandbars or broken on submerged rocks.

On one of the grounded ships, an older chevalier had the sense to free the horses and let them swim to shore. He doffed his treasured armor and swam after his mount. Meanwhile, the sailors lowered the ship's two boats and there was a bitter struggle over who would occupy them. Most chevaliers could not bear to remove their armor, but the majority of the survivors did. In one of the boats, the chevaliers discovered that none of them knew how to row or steer. That boat capsized before it was halfway to the beach.

The sun set, and the wind rose. The Nevarrans withdrew, pleased with their success. They had sunk nine of the fifteen warships and thirteen of the transports. Nine more transports had been wrecked by collisions or underwater hazards. Three of the transports had been heavily damaged and had surrendered. They were being towed back to Cumberland as prizes. Four transports had refused to surrender, and the Nevarrans did not want to waste time and lives in a hand-to-hand struggle. Instead, their masts and rudders destroyed, the ships were left to drift, helpless, toward whatever fate the Maker had in store for them.

The surviving Orlesian fleet of six warships and twenty-five transports was widely dispersed. Night was falling, and all of them felt the need to regroup. A number of them needed serious repairs. The logical move was to make for Jader and the port facilities there. They could still strike a serious blow against Ferelden, and they still outnumbered the pathetic Fereldan navy, but it might be wise to revisit

the details of their mission. Their admiral was dead, and his second-in-command as well. Once it was clearer who had survived, they could establish a new chain of command.

The ruins of the Orlesian army faced the dawn, beginning to comprehend the extent of the disaster. Most of the chevaliers and senior officers were dead. Most of the soldiers had no idea what they ought to do. There were hundreds of wounded, many suffering burns. The Marquis and a few other nobles had brought their own personal mage healers. Most had also been killed in the attack, but a few survived. Some took the opportunity to run away. Others remained, doing their best to treat the injured. A mob of furious soldiers gathered, blaming the mages for the acts of the Archdemon. Stones were thrown, but by the time knives were drawn, a junior officer was able to calm the situation. That officer sent some reliable men to destroy all the army's remaining stores of strong drink. Ale and wine were necessities, but brandy would drive frightened men to madness.

Other leaders arose. A minor noble from Halamshiral won some of the more patriotic to his side, urging them to come with him to Montsimnard.

"We cannot run like children from the darkspawn. Let us put ourselves under the command of the Grey Wardens, and fight for our country!"

Much of the army split along regional lines and many

men simply wanted to go home to their families. The soldiers who hailed from Val Royeaux did not want to go south to Montsimnard, but wanted to see if their loved ones had survived. A vigorous, charismatic sergeant mustered them into a company. They called themselves the Imperial Guard, which was absurd, since not one of them was well-born enough ever to have served in the actual Imperial Guard. However, they managed to organize and equip themselves decently, preparing to march north.

The degree of discipline varied widely, depending on the strength of the officers. Some attempted to capture and hang deserters, and were themselves hanged for their pains. Other officers were more respected, and were able to maintain order in the ranks. A large portion of the army remained at the camp at the River Orne, under the command of the junior officer, the *Sieur de Flambard*, who had quelled the riot. He sent out bands to requisition supplies from the locals, and assigned men to help care for the wounded, who of course all remained there in camp. There was talk that within a few days, they would have sufficient wagons to take the wounded along with them to Verchiel, the closest large city. The *Sieur de Flambard* meant well, but by degrees, the force was transforming into a gang of mercenaries, and he into a mercenary captain.

On the thirtieth of Guardian, the Wardens of Montsimnard came upon the camp, on their way to Val Royeaux. They were not alone, for Orlais had a second Circle of Mages,

this one at Montsimnard itself, and it was entirely at the disposal of the Orlesian Warden-Commander. The quarrels and debate raged anew. Precious time was wasted in trying to resolve all the factional conflicts. The influx of mages both helped the wounded and fanned the flames of discord. In the end, the Wardens moved on, taking the "Imperial Guard" with them, and that portion of the army that was still loyal to the Empress. By that time, a good fourth of the survivors had deserted and melted away into the countryside. Shortly thereafter, the *Sieur de Flambard* withdrew with his troops to Verchiel. The city did not know until much too late that it should have shut its gates against them.

The Orlesian fleet limped toward Jader, gradually falling into something of a formation. Two more ships sank during the voyage, though one had sunk slowly enough that there was time to evacuate the humans onto another vessel. A skeleton crew remained aboard, and headed to land, hoping to beach their foundering ship and save the horses and elves aboard. At the very least, they hoped to sink close enough to land for most to swim or float to safety.

On the first of Drakonis, the rest of the ships sighted the Jader headland.

They also sighted another fleet arrayed against them: a fleet of ten warships of varying sizes, and two modified caravels. A fireball arced out ominously toward them, a portent of their coming destruction. Immediately upon

realizing that these ships, too, carried mages, a number of transports turned south, preferring to offload their soldiers and horses rather than to lose them altogether. The Ferelden fleet moved in quickly, the wind with them. Nor were mages their only armament. Some ships moved in boldly, bearing strange machines that sprayed fire over the Orlesian ships in gouts of chemical flame.

They targeted the Orlesian warships, first. One of the modified caravels was particularly maneuverable, and captained by the clever and resourceful Isabela, it wreaked havoc on the enemy. She steered SIREN'S CALL in between a pair of warships, enabling the mages to attack from both sides of her ship. Leaving devastation in her wake, she sailed on, cleaving the Orlesian fleet in two.

What followed was a slaughter. Ships were pummeled, were burned, were shattered. Hulls were breached, masts toppled, canvas went up in flame. In the end, there was little choice for the survivors but to surrender. Prize crews were assigned, and the crestfallen chevaliers imprisoned below decks. Isabela had three prizes of her own, and rather than take chevaliers for ransom, decided that she would rather pass them on to her colleagues — once utterly stripped of valuables — and take their horses instead, which would be worth a fortune in Ferelden or Kirkwall. When a frightened elven servant asked what she intended for them, the Rivainni only shrugged, and said she would drop them off somewhere safe after her voyage was over.

Only one of the smaller Orlesian transports managed to escape into Jader harbor. It was not, alas, one of the ships carrying an experienced harbor pilot. The ship staggered, its hull caught in the soft wet sand of the Horn. The tide was low, but already flowing back in. Looking toward Jader, much of the Horn was exposed: a long, wet stretch leading to the harbor. It bulged out in the middle, and narrowed down at the end by the harbor.

"Quickly!" shouted a young chevalier. "Unload the horses. We can ride down the sand to Jader!"

With frantic speed, gangplanks were lowered into the shallow water, and the horses were led down them, squealing and neighing. Their tack was thrown over the side, along with the elven grooms, who saddled and bridled the horses, up to their thighs in the surf.

Chevaliers desperately packed their belongings, reluctant to leave anything behind. Heavy trunks and chests were shoved into the elven servants' arms, with dire threats if they did not arrive safely at the barracks. Some were more sensible, and took off down the sandbar as soon as they could mount their horses. It was a quite a long way to the city, and the water was perceptibly rising. Men-at-arms leaped down, bags slung over their shoulders, and marched away, sloshing through the water, stumbling onto the heavy sand, following the first of the horsemen, and dodging the laggards, for the chevaliers had not the least scruple about riding down anyone in their way. The

ship's boat was lowered, and the sailors piled in, sculling neatly toward the land.

Impatient, armed humans bellowed orders at the elves, demanding that their own horses be saddled first. It grew crowded and chaotic, as horses panicked and began swimming away. Cursing chevaliers ran after them, grabbing at their reins. More and more, as the water rose, men threw themselves onto their mounts bareback and galloped away. As the water rose, it flowed into the ship through the damaged hull, and the vessel shifted, leaning dangerously. The gangplanks collapsed, and the last of the horses fell into the water, eyes rolling white.

The narrow spit of sand was growing narrower by the moment as the water rose. A pair of elves, burdened by their master's impedimenta, looked at each other, threw the trunks aside, and began running.

Fourteen of the chevaliers made it to the harbor, riding hard. Twenty-five of the men-at-arms survived, though most had to swim the last third of the way. The ship's boat arrived, and was pulled up safely above the high-tide mark, while the captain told the shocking story of the defeat to the port commander, gesticulating wildly. Two of the elves – the ones who had run first – dog-paddled and splashed up onto the beach, and were beaten savagely by their master for losing his luggage.

The rest of the elves, the ones unable to swim, made it as far as the wide bulge in the Horn, but the water rose too

rapidly for them to make it to shore. They were trapped, easily visible, on a shrinking little island. The port commander looked at their through his fine spyglass, shaking his head. He sent some of his guards down to help the human survivors as they emerged from the sea and to catch the frantic, riderless horses.

"I suppose we could send out a boat for the elves," he muttered.

The captain shrugged. "My men are too weary. Besides, they could never reach them in time, anyway."

So they watched, as quite a large crowd gathered, chattering about how someone should do something. The cries of the elves drifted on the breeze, high and desperate, as the water rose up and covered them.

Jader was uneasy. The Alienage was seething.

News had come a few days before that Roc du Chevalier had fallen to Queen Bronwyn the Dragonslayer. The people of Jader were familiar with the rumors that Orlais was to launch an invasion of the country to the east. They were not sure what to do with the news that said country had taken Orlesian territory instead. Jader was very close to the Rock. It was only a day away, in fact. They had never felt vulnerable like this: not in their entire history.

It was also known that the darkspawn had risen and attacked Val Royeaux. No one had expected that. When the Wardens marched out, it seemed like the world had been turned upside down. The great army they were expecting

to house would almost certainly not be coming, because it would have other enemies – closer enemies – to fight.

And now the city learned that the invasion fleet, the dockyards for which they had spent thousands in taxes, had been destroyed. The enemy ships on the first day had been Nevarran, but the ships that had followed up the attack two days later had flown Ferelden colors. It was true, then: Nevarra and Ferelden had forged an alliance. That was ominous.

And the death of those elves out in the harbor had fired up the Alienage. Two of the elves had survived the shipwreck and a severe beating, and had run away, hiding among the elves of Jader. A patrol of city guards sent to retrieve the disobedient pair had been driven away with stones, and now the Alienage gates were shut. It was well known in the Alienage that Queen Bronwyn welcomed elves among her companions. Even the legendary Dalish elves had left their forest to follow her. *She* would not have left the elves to drown, surely.

The large dwarven population watched the situation unfold more objectively. The Marquis had never been popular among them, mainly because he never paid his bills. He was no friend to the dwarves. Queen Bronwyn, on the other hand, had not only fought in the Deep Roads as a Warden, but had traveled to Orzammar and settled the succession dispute in favor of the present king. The dwarves below had responded to her call to fight against the Blight. It made surface dwarves rather proud – in a

distant, third-hand sort of way – to know that their cousins were doing their part.

The Queen's ships had just whipped a huge Orlesian fleet. There was talk that she used magic, but also some clever inventions that sounded dwarven in origin. The Queen might be a human, but she had the sense to value good dwarven engineering.

And the Queen had agents in Jader. Everyone knew about the dwarf girl who was involved in a scuffle a little while ago. If she was not one of the Jader Wardens, then she was one of the Queen's. And she was definitely not one of the Jader Wardens.

An Empress might ordinarily outrank a Queen, but things were different when the Empress and her army were far away and under attack by the darkspawn, and the Queen in question was only a day away – with her own army. It put things in perspective. From all reports, Queen Bronwyn *did* pay her bills. The tax rate was a lot lower in Ferelden, too.

Even among certain elements of the human population of Jader – the free-thinking, the idealistic, the lovers of adventure – the young Red Queen was a popular figure of romance. She was the Girl Warden, the Dragonslayer: she pushed back the darkspawn and fearlessly followed them into their lairs. She had gathered champions around her, like a Hero of old; she upheld chivalry and justice by right of arms.

The apostate mages in Jader were also talking, through an offshoot of the Mage Collective. It looked like Queen

Bronwyn was turning toward Jader. She favored mages. She traveled with known apostates. The Revered Mother had denounced her in the Chantry for that. The enemy of their enemy was definitely their friend.

And then, a pair of hunters entered the city with the news that the Queen of Ferelden's host was at the gates of Chateau Solidor, which had opened to her.



Meanwhile, the Grey Wardens of Thedas considered the situation. As predicted, the initial attack by the darkspawn on faraway, insignificant Ferelden had been only a feint. No one had been taken in by it, and they congratulated themselves on their good judgment. The Wardens there had apparently dealt with it very commendably, although the acting commander was shockingly ignorant of tradition. However, that had been only a sideshow, and was now over. The real Blight had begun.

And it had begun with a very great catastrophe. A great city had been undermined and savaged, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of women had been taken, presumably to breed more darkspawn. Something must be done, and quickly.

The First Warden consulted the Chief Archivist for his analysis. He was grim, but pointed out that prompt action was the only acceptable strategy.

"It will take some time to turn all the women, because a proper nest must be established. We can hope that has not already been done. Then it takes, we believe, around

ten days to turn a woman into a Broodmother. After that it takes yet more time for the tubes and pods to develop and then a month for the first darkspawn to gestate. Alas, many things are unknown to us: how many darkspawn an average Broodmother can produce; the average lifespan of a Broodmother. Obviously, it is neither feasible nor acceptable to allow one to develop in controlled conditions. We do know that many of the captured women will die: of shock, of injuries, by suicide, by accident. There is evidence that some women die during the process of spawning."

The First Warden grimaced. "Many will also live. If you can call it that."

"True. We can expect a great increase in the horde in a little less than two months. This time is critical. While the Archdemon itself is the paramount danger, it is also vital that we raze Val Royeaux, find the nest or nests, and burn them out. Broodmothers are very hard to kill by conventional means. It is better to try to seal them in and use magic, poison, or fire. I suggest you form a task force of specialists to target this problem. The force will need serious defense, both by Wardens and by all allies we can command. And we must share this information with all the Warden-Commanders."

The First Warden listened, nodding sometimes, thinking through the best way to pursue the campaign. As he had predicted, the darkspawn had struck at an important target. Nonetheless, he must send word to that crazy

barbarian girl in Ferelden as well as the official Warden-Commanders. He had recently received an abusive missive from her. She was arrogant and untutored in proper Warden protocol, but that was not entirely her fault. She had so far been quite effective, both in gathering allies and in fighting darkspawn. Killing the Architect was quite the accomplishment. Besides, she had the ear of the King of Orzammar. Yes, he would send some experienced Warden liaisons to her: adaptable, *tactful* people who would know how not to end up with their heads on pikes. If she was still alive after the Blight, the Wardens should attempt to persuade her to relinquish her command to someone who did not insist on holding a title. If he sent good people, perhaps they would spot some likely candidates, even among those savages. Ordinarily he would have chosen an Orlesian, since Ferelden was so conveniently close to Orlais and the two countries had long-standing ties. The Orlesians, however, would have their hands full for the foreseeable future.

The heads of state were informed of the danger, as was standard procedure. None opposed the order's wish to fight the Blight. It was their duty. A powerful darkspawn menace on the surface could ultimately threaten everyone. A few expressed anxiety about a multiple attack, and requested that some Wardens remain within their borders. That was not deemed unreasonable. Every post left a garrison, both to watch for new attacks and to recruit new Wardens, who might soon be needed.

It was also time to invoke the ancient treaties. The dwarves had already committed themselves. The Circles of Magi were sent messages, summoning them to battle against the enemies of all life on Thedas.

The Tevinter Circle, of course, the oldest, largest, and most powerful Circle in Thedas, was the seat of power in the Imperium, as it included not just those who had attained the rank of magister, but all the Imperial Senators and the Imperial Archon himself. They had vast resources to draw upon, and would send an impressive contingent. And they did not hesitate to use Blood Magic. Very likely, it would be needed.

The First Warden contacted the Circle at Hossberg himself, sure, due to his influence in the Anderfels, of their complete cooperation. He was not disappointed. Aside from a few instructors who remained with the apprentices, everyone fit to travel would do so.

The reaction of the other Circles varied, depending on the relative power of the secular authorities versus the Chantry. In Rivain, the site of the last and final battle of the Fourth Blight, where Garahel fell, the response was strong.

The Nevarrans sent word to Cumberland. Prince Tylus was somewhat startled to learn that at the same time they had sent two dozen able enchanters to attack the Orlesian fleet, the darkspawn were attacking Val Royeaux. Nonetheless, he did not regret the raid, which had been very profitable. The fleet would have attacked their new ally, ignorant

of events in their own country. The Grand Enchanter told him that the mages had enjoyed their adventure. More volunteered to join the Grey Wardens and the Nevarran auxiliaries. As for the Orlesian prisoners, he decided that rather than hold them for ransom – which might be long in coming – he would permit the Grey Wardens to inform them of the situation. To a man, they chose to march with the Wardens rather than rot in Nevarran dungeons.

In Antiva, there was some excitement at the news of a Blight, and a feeling that this was an exciting, historic adventure, worth experiencing. The Templars, hearing of the destruction of the Grand Cathedral, were eager to go and avenge the depredations of the false Old God. Their attitude enabled a very large number of mages to sail with them. The Wardens even experienced an influx of hopeful recruits, including a number of Crows, who wanted a change. The Crow Masters discussed this, and decided that as a Blight was an event that had not happened in four hundred years, permitting a few restless boys and girls to take part was, in fact, good public relations.

The Warden post at Ansbarg in the Free Marches received an excellent response from the Circle in their home city. The numbers they could muster from Markham and Starkhaven were less impressive. They traveled by riverboat down the Minanter to Wycome, where they took ship. At Ostwick, they docked, and the Warden-Commander made a personal appeal to the First Enchanter

and the Knight-Commander, with considerable success. A similar attempt in Kirkwall yielded not a single mage, for Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard forbade any mage or Templar of the Kirkwall Circle to leave.

"The Grey Wardens," she said coldly, "have ever been a refuge for criminals and apostates."

The Warden-Commander looked her in the eye, and left, making a note to deal with her later. The Grey Wardens would not forget such an insult.

Nonetheless, word got out, as word will do, and a number of Kirkwall's mages, both apostates and from the Circle itself, slipped away. A few managed to make it to the docks and offer their lives and magic to the Warden-Commander. Others braved the terrors of the Planascene Forest and its wyverns, or the desert lands of the Vimmark Pass. Some even survived, and found armies that were glad to take them.

From Tevinter, from Nevarra, and from Weisshaupt, a great army of Wardens, their griffon banners streaming in the wind, journeyed south on the Imperial Highway, moving toward the source of the Blight. The First Warden himself was in command, glad that he had lived to see this day. Border crossings were alerted to expect large numbers of Grey Wardens. The other Wardens, from Rivain and Antiva and the Free Marches, took ship to the south, to fulfill the duty that could not be forsworn.

There was also the matter of the Dalish, who, like the Dwarves and the mages, were also bound by ancient treaties to support the Wardens. This was a far trickier matter. Historically, sometimes the Dalish came forth against the Blights. Sometimes they did not.

For one thing, one had to be able to *find* the Dalish. The Dalish did not conveniently live in an underground city or in a tower, but flitted through the forest, treading softly. Nor did they live in all the nations of Thedas. No sane Dalish elf would set foot within the borders of the Tevinter Imperium, since the practice there was to capture and enslave any "wild" elf.

There was also the delicate issue of the Blight having arisen in Orlais, which was another place that the Dalish tended to avoid – or at least which they traveled through as unobtrusively as possible. After all, the Dalish were named for the Dales of Orlais, their ancient homeland, granted to them for their loyal service to Andraste herself. However, after the Second Blight, relations had soured, and the Orlesians had roused the Divine to declare an Exalted March on the elves, ultimately resulting in the acquisition of territory that now amounted to a fourth of the Empire, composing its eastern portion from Montsimnard (once a border fortress) all the way to the Frostbacks. The Dalish elves were the survivors of the elven aristocracy: those who, unlike the commoners who had been herded into the Alienages, they had kept their independence at the price of a wandering life.

Would the Dalish fight to protect the Orlesians, against whom they must hold bitter rancor? The First Warden doubted it. As well ask them to fight for the Tevinters, were they invaded. Rumor had it that the girl in Ferelden had made contact with the Dalish, and that a number of them had joined her, but would they remain with her when she turned west?

The First Warden's doubts were well-founded. Attempts by the Wardens to enlist the Dalish yielded spotty results. Some Warden-Commanders had conscientiously tried to maintain relations with various clans, and a few of those gave vague promises of going south. More simply melted away into the forests. In the Free Marches, the Warden assigned the duty of contacting the elves was given a blunt refusal by one clan's Keeper.

"That treaty you speak of no longer has any validity. It was made between the Lords of the Dales and the Grey Wardens. The Dales were stolen from the elves by your Chantry, and the Grey Wardens did not aid us then. We shall not aid you now. If the darkspawn come, we shall fight them in our own way."

While the Wardens and their allies upheld – or not – their ancient duties, the various nations of Thedas considered how best to deal with other aspects the current crisis. The current *Orlesian* crisis. Some Wardens were more forthcoming than others. The Chief Archon of Tevinter and the King of Nevarra were on excellent terms with their respective Warden-Commanders, and they now knew that

Orlais was currently without a ruler. They knew that the elite had been savaged by the attack, and that the empire would be in disarray for years, perhaps for decades. Possibly permanently. And everyone hated Orlais.

The Archons of Tevinter debated the matter, and within days, all the property of Orlesian nationals was confiscated, including their ships, their goods, their houses, and even their persons. As Orlais had made itself universally unloved, there was no outcry at the injustice, but rather a great deal of spiteful satisfaction. Other foreign merchants were pacified with new contracts without Orlesian competition. It was all a tremendous boon to the Imperium's coffers, and the Imperial Archon judiciously gave a considerable portion of the proceeds to the Grey Wardens, to further their valuable, nay, *essential* mission. Over a hundred fit and healthy Orlesians were offered the choice between slavery and induction into the Wardens. They would be sent south to fight as soon as a slave ship was refitted for the duty.

There were also Orlesian mages in Tevinter. Some had been sent there through official channels as students. Others were escaped apostates, making new lives in a land where the word "mage" was not an insult. It was decided that these individuals would be treated quite differently. They were approached, and also offered the chance to become Wardens, but the Joining was not forced upon them. However, in Tevinter, Grey Warden mages were deemed the elite of the order, and paid accordingly.

A number of immigrants looked upon it as a good opportunity – excellent pay, free room and board, potential for advancement – which it was, if one survived the initiation.

King Baltus of Nevarra heard the news with grim joy, and began redrawing the maps. Not immediately, but eventually, all of northern Orlais would be Nevarra. They would not go all the way to Val Royeaux, because that would be Blighted, and unfit for habitation for generations, but from Arlesans to Andoral's Reach, they would have new, great cities to add to their realm. Due west held few charms: marshes, deserts, barren mountains. Let the Orlesians continue to claim those worthless territories. The prize plums would be his. He sent troops to support the Wardens. Their secondary duty would be to stem the tide of refugees – preferably by diverting them to the undesirable Western Approach.

The news filtered more slowly to other countries. The Crows of Antiva received it faster than the queen of that country, due to a contact within the Grey Wardens themselves. Their first response was to cancel the contracts on those already known to be dead, and to send no more assassins to Val Royeaux. Presumably the members of their cell within the city were either dead or fighting to survive. The various Masters then called a council to discuss the validity of contracts taken out by those deceased individuals, primarily those taken out by the Empress or her agents. The Empress had her own Shadows, of course, but

the Crows had also been used, especially when she wished to deceive others with a false flag attack. While the Crows prided themselves on honoring their contracts as a general rule, there was no one who would hold them to account if these particular contracts were not fulfilled. They could keep the gold and protect their human and elven assets, who might otherwise be killed or injured. There were some other longstanding contracts, such as the one on Loghain Mac Tir, which were set aside as a separate issue. No one had dared to take up that contract in several years. However, a number of other people had also contracted for his death, and so a final decision was held in abeyance.

The contracts taken out by Rendon Howe on the young Queen of Ferelden and her brother were cancelled. Rendon Howe was no longer alive to complain, and the Fereldans were fighting the Blight, which was an advantage to them all, now that everyone was convinced that it was indeed a Blight. However, word had come that the contract taken out on the Howe family was incomplete. Signora Fortuny, that distinguished and important patron, had learned that the eldest son, now Arl of Amaranthine, had survived, and she was very angry. The Masters agreed that someone must be sent to tie up that unfortunate loose end.

Some members of the clergy also knew of the attack on Val Royeaux. The Black Divine in Minrathous had naturally been informed, and had kept his solemn countenance to an admirable degree, as he led prayers for those

dead in the rival religious center to the south. The Grand Cleric of Nevarra knew that the Grand Cathedral had been destroyed and that many clergy had perished. No one could tell her the fate of the Divine.

Ser Silas Corthwaite had been following the Imperial Highway, day after day. His heart lifted at the longed-for sight of the Frostback Gates, the wide mountain pass that was the gateway to Orzammar, and further on, to Ferelden. Ultimately, the way narrowed, as it led through heavily fortified Gherlen's Pass, but that was another day away.

There was much on his mind. The Divine was totally under the control of the Reclamationist Party, who wanted to put Ferelden under Orlesian rule once more. The attack by the darkspawn at Ostagar was interpreted by them as a sign of the Maker's anger against the Fereldans, who had rebelled against their rightful rulers. The Empress had been cool to the Reclamationists for years, but the darkspawn attack had evidently seemed a fine opportunity to regain those fertile fields in the Bannorn. Orlais needed Ferelden to better prosecute its war with Nevarra.

People tended to forget that Silas was Ferelden-born-and-bred himself, and when reminded, they would condescend with silly compliments about how civilized and courteous he was, and how he was not at all like a Fereldan.

His usual response was, "I *am* a Fereldan. Therefore, I am exactly like one."

He did not like the Orlesians taking advantage of what the Grey Wardens regarded as a Blight, but there had been little he could do, until Revered Mother Dorothea had given him a direct order to warn Grand Cleric Muirin. Orlais was not a safe place for her. She should plead ill-health and stay in Denerim, no matter how pressing the "invitations" were.

He rode on, resting his horse frequently, since he had not had a change since Halamshiral. Perhaps he should turn off and head toward Jader, where he could get a fresh pair of horses and night's rest in a bed in the Templar barracks. That, however, might delay him. It was vital to keep ahead of the Imperial Army.

As a Templar, he could generally claim shelter most places, and considered the idea of stopping at Chateau Solidor instead. The castle drew closer as he rode, its towers blending into the rugged hills behind it. It was an Imperial fortress, and the captain there would almost certainly welcome him. As he approached, something nagged at him. Something was different here, and he tried to determine what it was.

And then he noticed the banner at the topmost tower. Silas was fairly sure that particular banner should not be there. He picked up the pace, squinting ahead, and then noticed all the activity surrounding the castle. Something had happened...

The soldiers had noticed him now, and were looking his way. It would cowardly and foolish to turn around and gallop off. He rode on, and presented himself to the nearest officer.

"Ser Silas Corthwaite of the Grand Cathedral. I am bear-

ing a message for the Grand Cleric of Ferelden."

"Well — " The officer chuckled grimly. "That's way above my pay grade. Reckon you'll need to see the Queen. Follow me."

Silas dismounted and followed the officer. His horses were led away, with the officer's cheerful assurance that no one would steal them. Once they reached the gates of the castle proper, he was handed off to a different officer, this one with finer armor. Yes, it was perfectly plain that Fereldan troops occupied this castle. The Queen was actually here? What had happened? Had the Fereldans taken Jader, too?

Puzzling over the strange situation, he did not notice the pretty young woman coming down the stairs until she called out to him.

"Silas!"

"Leliana!"



CHAPTER 7

VIVE LA
REINE ROUGE

HERE WAS A DISTINCT LACK OF LIGHT IN THE AEONAR. The rooms occupied by Wardens were very dark indeed, and

devoid of comfort. They reminded Tara of another place she had disliked: the Circle Tower. They were worse, really, for at least there were some windows at the Circle, even if they were very high up on the wall and filled with colored glass, so one could never see outside. At least some light had come in... pretty colored light. The Aeonar was lit by a combination of dwarven crystals and candles. It was smoky and mysterious in a rather threatening way, and it made getting a good look at anything something of a problem. Tara had plenty she wanted to study in detail here, and holding a candle close to time-worn symbols and markings seemed less likely to reveal secrets of the past than to set her hair on fire.

She stood back, gazing at the magnificent mirror. The frame, incised with arcane signs, was not mere gilded wood or plaster, but mostly gold, hence the weight of the

object. It was far taller than she, and hinted at possibilities beyond imagination.

"It's an eluvian," Tara decided, studying the elaborate object Brosca was briefly distracted from munching sausages. "A what?" "A magical elven mirror."

"Neat." Brosca paused. "What kind of magic? What does it do?" "Nothing, yet. Give me time. I've only now figured out what it is."

Tara hoped they would leave the Aeonar soon. Loghain had disposed of the worst offenders, and had set up a garrison to protect this place. The Wardens had moved all their loot to the rooms they occupied. At the moment, the Aeonar was not good for much of anything other than as an observation post for watching the sea and for providing shelter for transient troops. Tara wanted to move on and see what was being done about the darkspawn, but there had been delays due to supply problems and heavy rains. While they waited, Tara examined and catalogued the magical objects they had found stored here, and she carefully protected her own finds from Uldred's grasping hands.

She had gone on an Elven Heritage spree a few years before, and read everything in the Circle Library about Her Elven Ancestors. There was even a book on the elven language, though it was not a complete grammar, but more a word list. For that matter, it had not helped her much with the Dalish, since it seemed that their pronunciation had diverged from whatever source the book's writer had used. There were lots of languages in Thedas,

after all, and why shouldn't there be variations in the elven tongue? And they had used more than one kind of writing. The symbols in the ancient elven temple were unknown to her. There had been quite a few ancient texts there, too, and perhaps some of them might hold a key to deciphering some of the symbols. However, at the Circle, the books about the elves were written in standard letters, and the words could be sounded out.

One book about elven culture she had particularly enjoyed was entitled *A CATALOG OF ELVEN RELICS*. It was filled with fascinating lore about some of the objects, some magical, some not, that a scholar of ancient history had found or heard about. The scholar himself seemed to be human, based on the tone of the the text: a little breathless, a bit patronizing, and unnecessarily mysterious.

She had found the information on eluvians quite impressive. After destroying Arlathan and enslaving elvenkind, the Tevinter magisters had plundered the magical treasures of the elven empire, and a number of eluvians had fallen into their hands. The one in front of her – it must be thousands of years old – must be one of them.

The magisters had never unlocked all the secrets of the eluvians. They had used them to communicate with one another. Perhaps they still did. Perhaps the Tevinters still had working eluvians. It might be another reason why, even though diminished, they had never fallen: not to the Qunari, not to the Exalted Marches.

According to her book, however, the elves had been able to do other things with their eluvians, most specifically, they had been able to use them as portals. Tara was not sure if that meant that they traveled from eluvian to eluvian or to some magically-designated place. Magical travel would be marvelous.

For now, she wrapped up the elaborate mirror and kept it in the room she slept in with the female Wardens. She had told all her people to say nothing about it.

She next asked Darach in private if he knew anything about eluvians, but he did not recognize even the name, and referred her to Marethari.

"Or Merrill," he said, after a while, considering it further. "Merrill is very interested in the old days of Arlathan. The clan has a few books that the Keeper takes care of. I know nothing more."

Footsore and done in, Siofranni found Keeper Marethari and her clan on the first of Drakonis. Merrill joined them, wide-eyed, wanting to hear the news. Siofranni sat wearily on a mossy stone bench and tried to put her thoughts in order.

"At first we feared that the Orlesians would invade. Danith wished to inform you and to ask the elves to come to their aid. Now, however, it seems unlikely that the Orlesians will come, for the darkspawn have risen. I think it was in Orlais, for their words sounded like Leliana's. At any rate, the darkspawn destroyed a great city,

and slaughtered many elves. It was dreadful, Keeper.”

Marethari gave her some strengthening herb tea, and soon a roasted partridge, so tender that the meat slipped from the bones. Siofranni ate and drank gratefully while Marethari and Merrill pondered her words.

“We must send a runner to Lanaya, and to the other clans who have come to Arladahlen.”

Siofranni caught the unfamiliar name. From the context, it was what they had decided to name the elven homeland centering around the ancient temple. “Home in the Forest” seemed appropriate.

Merrill said, “I think we should go. We have given our word to Bronwyn. We pledged our help to the Wardens, long ago.”

Marethari was not so sure. “Will elves die to defend the Orlesians who drove us from the Dales? Will they die for city elves? It cannot be decided by one or two.”

Merrill waited until Siofranni had finished her meal, and then touched her arm.

“Come, *lethallan*. We shall find you shelter for the night, while the others gather.”

“*Ma serannas*.”

As they walked, Siofranni was astonished at the changes taking place. She had seen the ancient temple only once, and briefly. It looked very different now. Orderly settlements radiated out from it, in rings of aravels. Within the temple itself, rubble had been cleared, and paving replaced. New rooms had been found, opened up, and

cleaned. Some had held great and ancient treasures. Some had been the abode of giant spiders.

The temple had been of great service to Marethari’s clan during the hard winter that was now transforming into spring. It was not common for elves to live indoors, but not unheard of, when ruins or abandoned huts could be found. The clan had adapted happily to the security and comfort of a sound roof overhead.

Merrill said, “We lost no little ones over the winter. It is a great blessing.”

“What of the barrier to protect us from the shemlen?”

Merrill was pensive and a little sad. “It is a difficult matter. It seems we must have two barriers: an inner one, to protect the temple and the settlement itself, and then a looser, outer one. We wish to keep out enemies, but we wish for other elves to be able to find us. We wish not be troubled, but we must also respect the migration paths of birds and beast and insects. If we girdle our Arladahlen too tightly, we will strangle it.” She gave herself a little shake. “But it is a great blessing, nonetheless, and we are learning so much all the time!”

“But you will come to help us fight the darkspawn?”

“I shall come, and other friends. Perhaps not so many this time.”

Astrid swept into Orzammar on the first of Drakonis, and summoned the deshyrs to the Assembly, informing them that

the darkspawn had made a major assault on the surface.

"Val Royeaux?" asked Lady Dace. "Isn't that the largest surface city, Paragon?"

Astrid did not believe that it was. Probably Minrathous was larger, but she let the mistake pass. Val Royeaux was much closer to Orzammar than Minrathous was, and would thus stir up the Assembly more.

With a decent, utterly false pretense of brotherly cooperation, King Bhelen pointed out that Orzammar's army had already been put under the command of his good friend, Queen Bronwyn.

"True," his sister the Paragon said, smiling sweetly. "And they've done good service. We need more troops, however, to turn west. I'll make a sweep of Dust Town, and see what I can round up there."

"You can take all the filthy Dusters," gibed Lord Wodrak. "Every one of them! Another service to Orzammar."

There was some laughter, but not, to Bhelen's disappointment, the mocking sort. His sister accepted the jest with good humor.

"And so I shall. Every one of them fit to bear arms. However, we must also consider the defense of Orzammar itself. I'll be making an inspection of the new barrier doors. It's vital that we keep the Amgarrak Road open. We need another set as well, to close off the Kadash Road at the Forks. The Wardens have explored part of the Kadash Road — at least the part that leads under Gherlen's Pass, but further

expeditions will have to wait until the end of the Blight."

"Any sign of the Archdemon?"

"It led the assault on Val Royeaux. The darkspawn are nesting there. We'll want to put a stop to that, but it will take time to go west. We're summoning everyone, including the various units of the Legion of the Dead."

"Did you find any more golems?"

"Not functional ones. King Loghain found one in Denerim, and someone got it to work. He's keeping it, unsurprisingly. Queen Bronwyn has one with her as well. Our people are keeping their eyes out. There were quite a few in Kal'Hirol, but they were badly damaged. Smiths are seeing what they can do with them."

She and Bhelen strolled about, inspecting, chatting amicably. Only the most perspicacious and cunning of nobles could divine the underlying tension. All seemed perfect harmony. The Paragon admired her growing nephew, gave him a gold goblet of antique date, and was informed that another Aeducan was on the way.

"Excellent news!" she approved, quite sincerely. "I'll be sure to find an equally fine gift for him... or her. I should like to have a niece."

That remark caused quite a bit of embarrassment. Another son would take his father's caste. A daughter, of course, would take her mother's. Rica Brosca had been admitted into the Aeducan clan, but as a concubine. Her child would technically have no caste at all. Astrid only

smiled at Bhelen's expression.

"Don't worry about it!" she cooed at her little brother. "If it's a girl, I'll adopt her. Such a convenient way to have an heir."

Bhelen eyed her speculatively, and gave a nod. "That might... be a solution."

In the end, she was able to round up a few hundred recruits, and put them under her lieutenants for some short, sharp training. Once she had them in order, she really ought to find Bronwyn and see what she was doing about the darkspawn in Orlais. Probably doing a victory dance. Once she finished that, Astrid had some ideas about how they should move on the horde in the west.

"Silas!"

"Leliana!"

Leliana had only a few moments to catch up with her old comrade Silas before he was led into the Queen's presence. He seemed — aside from some distinguished gray in his beard — much the same as he had three years before, when they had escaped Marjolaine's vicious trap. Mother Dorothea had saved them both, and saved more than their lives. Meeting her had changed them and given them purpose. Leliana had gone to the bucolic peace of the Lothering Chantry, to take stock of her life and choices. Silas had taken vows as a Templar, wanting to make a difference for the better. It was good to see him again.

"You're a Warden?" he asked, astonished.

"And you're a Templar!" she teased. "We are both very important people!" She grew grave. "You know about the darkspawn, of course."

"I know there is a Blight," he said, uncertain what she meant. He had ridden far and fast, and talked little with anyone, even at the Templar posts. "The darkspawn appear to be quiet for now."

"Oh..." she said, hating to tell him. "You do not know the latest news. Did you not come across the Wardens of Jader when you were coming east?"

"No." He chuckled ruefully. "I was doing my best not to be noticed. I am on a mission from a mutual friend."

"Mother Dorothea!" Leliana sighed. "I hope she is well..."

"She was when I last saw her," Silas replied. "Why? What has happened?"

"My friend," she said, her hand on his arm. "The darkspawn have risen. They have attacked Val Royeaux."

He was thunderstruck. At first, he could not believe his ears.

"How is this possible? How can you have heard this? I was in Val Royeaux only eight days ago."

"The darkspawn attacked in the early morning of the twenty-sixth. I am not permitted to tell you how I know, but it is true. It was a terrible attack. Many are dead, and many are fleeing for their lives."

"The Divine? The Revered Mother?"

"We do not know. Come. Speak to Her Majesty. She is planning to fight the darkspawn, once she need not fear daggers in her back."

Silas found himself quite impressed by the young Queen of Ferelden. He had heard of the Couslands, of course. A very great family, overlords of the Howes, who ruled Amaranthine, where Silas was from originally. In his youth, he had often seen Bann Esmerelle at a distance, haughty and exacting. Word had come that she had left Ferelden after the fall of Rendon Howe. Silas had seen Arl Rendon Howe on occasion, and once the Teyrn, Bryce Cousland. Those two were dead, of course. Old Rendon's elder son was arl now. Nathaniel... that was the name. Silas had seen him too on occasion, years before. Some new fellow was ruling the city, and Silas knew nothing about him. He had never expected to see Ferelden again. After what he had suffered from Harwen Raleigh and his Orlesian doxy, Marjolaine, Silas was not sure he wanted to.

That did not mean of course, that he wished his native country ill. If it had meant riding all the way to Denerim to do his duty, he would, of course. But perhaps he might not have to.

The tall and comely queen greeted him affably, less because he was a Templar than because he was vouched for by Leliana. Silas studied her. Why not? She was, at the moment, perhaps the most remarkable person living in Thedas, and looked it. Her eyes, while large and beautifully shaped, were not of a green seen anywhere but in a cup of poison. Silas found them rather alarming. Her armor was likewise notable, and according to gossip, was

made from the bones and scales of a dragon killed by the queen herself. Perhaps she had killed a dragon, and perhaps she had not, but the armor was clearly from that rare substance, the remains of a High Dragon. Leaning on the chair was a big longsword in an antique scabbard. Something about the weapon was odd, and Silas' senses, attuned to the arcane and magical, flared briefly at it.

Queen Bronwyn's mabari watched him with narrowed eyes, apparently sizing him up. Silas, knowing something of the breed, wisely did not get into a staring contest with him. Leliana seemed quite at her ease, and that boded well.

"Your Majesty. This is my friend, Ser Silas Corthwaite," she said, with an elaborate curtsy. "We had many adventures together a few years ago. He is a brave man and fine swordsman."

Silas bowed, and the queen inclined her head graciously.

"Ser Silas. Any friend of Warden Leliana's is welcome." She looked a question at Leliana.

"No, Majesty," said Leliana. "He did not know about the attack. He left Val Royeaux on the..."

"...the twenty-third," Silas interjected.

"Ah." Bronwyn looked upon him with a hint of compassion. "The darkspawn rose in the early morning of the twenty-sixth. You have outridden the news."

"But *you* are aware of it, Your Majesty," Silas pointed out warily, wondering just how she could know.

"Yes, we are. All the Wardens are. The Wardens of Jader left the city on the twenty-seventh, heading west. Surely



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you must have seen them."

"I did my best not to be seen by anyone, Your Majesty. Had I noted their camp, I would have avoided them. I stayed at Templar barracks along the way. I do not recall seeing Warden armor. Somehow, our paths did not cross."

"And you did not wish to be seen..." Her green eyes turned thoughtful. "Now why is that?"

He knew most of the gossip in Val Royeaux. He had also seen a certain report. "I was entrusted with a message to the Grand Cleric Muirin."

"Indeed. And what message was that?"

There seemed little reason for secrecy. And offending this lady would be very unwise.

"Not to come to Val Royeaux under any circumstances, Your Majesty." He lowered his voice. "Certain events took place before I left. The climate was perhaps too hot for someone of her years..."

Bronwyn sat back in her favored chair, considering. She seemed to understand that he wished to tell her more in private. "Indeed. We shall speak more of this later. For now, take your ease. Leliana will help you find comfortable quarters. Do not wander far, since you are not known to my people."

Silas bowed out, along with Leliana, and she tugged on his arm, leading him upstairs.

"No mere barracks for you, my friend!" she declared. "Friends of Wardens stay among the Wardens. We have taken some choice rooms here. I shall introduce you to my companions."



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"Wait!" Silas slowed and urged her to a corner, out of the way of busy soldiers and servants.

"Is it true?" he whispered. "About the Ashes?"

She dimpled, and then patted his arm. "All true. I wish you had been there. So beautiful. So glorious. And then," she shrugged ruefully. "And then there was a dragon to fight. We could have used your sword. We lost a good friend."

"I saw the report of the conclave. It was... amazing. The Revered Mother Dorothea believed it. It made many very angry."

"Our Lady Andraste made many angry, too. But that did not stop her from telling the truth. Let us get you settled. After supper tonight, I shall take you to speak to the Queen in private."

He was ushered into a room that seemed filled to bursting with exuberant warriors.

"My friend Ser Silas!" Leliana shouted into the pandemonium. "He's staying with us!"

A dwarf smirked. "Is he staying with us, or staying with you, Red?"

They were certainly a motley crew. Silas realized that he had been rather sequestered in the past years, living with clergy, dining with clergy, working with clergy. As he had been an aide to Revered Mother Dorothea in the Grand Cathedral, he had almost never seen an elf or a dwarf in that time. He never met a Dalish elf in his life. Nor were they the most exotic of all the company.

In the common room was... a golem. Silas remembered hearing a reference to such creatures many years ago in

a story or legend. He had believed them to be fantasy, but there was not only a golem in the common room, but the golem could speak and had a name.

"Another squishy human. Charming. Do make yourself at home. Hang your cloak on me to dry. Don't stand on ceremony."

Aside from the snark, he could tell that his Templar armor did him no favor with the elves or the mages. One of the mages, in fact, was an apostate. Silas blinked at the sight of the beautiful Morrigan, and he had a wild impulse to arrest her on the spot. Probably a mistake, as another mage, obviously her lover, hung about her, hand on his staff, glaring blackly at Silas' Templar regalia, and Silas in it. The woman was the most outrageously apostatish apostate Silas had even met. His thoughts raced.

"Apostatish? Is that a word? No, but it describes her."

She was not even a Warden! A number of people here were not, but were fighting with them as auxiliaries: a golden-skinned elf with a permanently amused expression, a tall elf with the strangest tattoos, and an enormous Qunari who watched everything, but said little.

The actual Wardens were likewise diverse: dwarves and humans and Dalish elves. A city elf, too: a delicate, pretty creature with soulful black eyes and silky blond hair. Even among the humans were men and women, tall and short, with a range of accents.

Everyone was eating, though it was only mid-afternoon. Silas was invited to join them, and set to gratefully, since

his last good meal had been in Halamshiral, three days before. Leliana was on one side of him, apparently having a second breakfast. Across from him was a pleasant young fellow named Carver. On his other side was a handsome red-haired woman, who did not seem hostile. She was tall and strong, and clearly a warrior.

"Aveline," she introduced herself. "Welcome to the madhouse, Ser Silas."

Over sausages, eggs, and cold pigeon pie, he was given the tale of Solidor's precipitous surrender. It was really almost funny. Clearly, the Fereldan Wardens intended to pursue the campaign against the darkspawn, but wished to protect their rear. Silas assumed that Jader would be next. The rest of the Ferelden army was on its way.

They talked cheerfully, in a kind of code that escaped Silas; the kind of code used by friends who have seen things no one else would understand. There were oblique references to Orzammar, and a place called Dust Town; to people called Merrill and Lanaya; to other Wardens named Tara and Brosca. To Silas' dismay, Leliana slipped away and left him here among these peculiar strangers.

"She'll be back," predicted the half-drunken dwarf, whom Carver had addressed as Oghren. "Got to nurse and change the little princesses."

Silas must have looked quite blank, because Aveline then kindly explained that the Empress' cousins – young ladies, and certainly not infants – were prisoners here,

and that Leliana had made friends with them.

There was a spare bed in one of the rooms, and Silas put his gear by it. He hoped the next bed over was not Oghren's. He would bet serious money that Oghren snored like a bear.

A few more Wardens made their appearance, and Silas listened to more of their stories, feeling that he needed more context to make sense of them. He had stories of his own, but thought it best to share them with the Queen first.

It was nearly sunset by the time Leliana returned, and then they went to a different room — one with guards at the door, that must be the Queen's private apartments.

Silas made his bows again, and was told to sit. Then it was time to tell her the whole ugly tale.

"The Divine had me burned in effigy?" Bronwyn was shocked. Whatever she had expected, it was not that. The idea was grotesque, vindictive, absurd.

"And the Grand Cleric Muirin as well. It was done with the full ceremony of anathema, in front of the Grand Cathedral. With a choir." He shrugged an apology at a white-faced Leliana.

"They were cast out?" she gasped. "That is... monstrous!"

"The burning did not come off quite as they intended," said Silas. "A storm came up quite suddenly. The Grand Cathedral was struck by lightning and the north tower was seriously damaged. A number of people were hurt... and many were killed. Then came the rain. The effigies were drenched." He cleared his throat. "The worst thing was the panic. Dozens

more were killed as they tried to flee."

Bronwyn frowned, not picturing it. Silas explained.

"The cathedral complex is surrounded by a wall, which has only a few openings. Most people fled south and the crowd panicked, and trampled the weaker underfoot."

"Maker's Breath!" Bronwyn exclaimed. "What madness! Those poor people! Was the Divine really so offended by the conclave's report?"

Silas grimaced. "It was not what the Reclamationist party would wish to hear. And really, you must understand, the claims made in the report were such... anyone ill-disposed to you would dismiss it out of hand. To be fair, I do not think the Divine understood much of it. She has been unwell, and suffers much from the debilitation of old age."

Bronwyn blinked, still trying to take it all in. "I was declared anathema? Am I even an Andrastean anymore?"

This was very bad news. If this got out, her right to rule as Queen as Ferelden could be challenged... even her right to live.

"You are an Andrastean if you say you are," Leliana said fiercely. "They do not have that sort of power over you, Bronwyn!"

For that matter, Mother Dorothea had had a great deal to say in private about such an obviously political abuse of Chantry ritual. Whether it was binding according to canon law was another matter. It would be a question for the next Divine to resolve. Silas decided not to express an opinion.

The Queen spoke. "I shall send a letter to the Grand Cleric, telling her of this. Of course, the point is now moot.

Even if she were so foolish as to present herself before the Divine, she would be hard put to find her. As for you, Ser Silas, what will you do? You may certainly travel on to Denerim, and I daresay the Grand Cleric will find work for you, but perhaps you might wish to stay with us."

Silas very much felt he ought to stay and fight, when the entire world was in danger. "If it would not be too much trouble, Your Majesty."

"No trouble at all."

It was one thing to fight darkspawn, to slay dragons, to thwart assassins. Bronwyn knew she had many enemies. Somehow, learning that the world leader of the religion she professed thought she was so evil that she had to be burned in effigy and publicly made excommunicate was painfully depressing. Had the clergy applauded? Had the Templars' hearts swelled with pride at the celebration? Had the people cheered her defamation? She had been fighting the Blight, protecting the unhelpful world from the darkspawn, and those ingrates in Val Royeaux had made her *anathema*?

People often claimed that life was unfair. Of course it was. Bronwyn tried not to whine. Compared to others, she had won life's lottery as the strong and healthy daughter of a great nobleman. It was the nature of darkspawn to massacre, of dragons to ravage, of assassins to murder. None of them claimed to speak for the righteous. For the Divine and her clerics, however, to denounce her in such a way seemed

so perverse and hypocritical that Bronwyn felt an intense, spiteful satisfaction that most of them were probably horribly dead or driven into exile. It really, really did serve them right.

As for the Empress, Bronwyn would not shed a tear for her. The Empress had compassed Bronwyn's death while Bronwyn was defending Thedas from monsters. That was greedy, selfish, and vile on a cosmic level. The world was better off without such a person ruling a great empire.

Of course, the Blight itself was horribly unfair to the innocent common folk of Val Royeaux. Thousands must be dead: the old, the sick, expectant mothers, little children; humans, dwarves, and elves alike. The fate of the elves seemed particularly cruel — crammed into that sty of an Alienage, forbidden to learn to defend themselves, disregarded by those who ruled them. How many elven women would be made Broodmothers? The Wardens of Thedas would be fighting sharlocks for many years, most likely. What the abducted women were experiencing at this moment was unbearable to contemplate. Bronwyn decided not to contemplate it, as it would do neither them nor her any good, and turned her mind to the monumental task before her.

One hoped that the rest of the Wardens would be roused to actions by the disaster in Val Royeaux. They had not cared a jot for Ferelden, but perhaps the destruction of a great city known to many of them would shock them into action. As for her, she would not wait to see what they would do. She must act herself. The darkspawn would be

marching soon. The Archdemon might well choose to lead them eastwards along the Imperial Highway, where the cities of Orlais were set like a string of pearls. Ultimately, that march would lead to Jader, and then through Gherlen's Pass to Ferelden. Hiding behind stone walls or theoretical borders would not save them.

And then, later that evening, an extraordinary piece of luck came her way. Luck? Perhaps not. Perhaps it was simply human – or elven – nature.

The two city elves from Jader who appeared before her were not very attractive specimens, for they were gaunt and weathered and sly-faced. They had, however, been resourceful enough to sneak out of Jader and present themselves to the Queen of Ferelden. They had come to Solidor, looking for her.

Once led before her, they performed something that looked like cringing rather than bowing. Scout growled at them, perhaps objecting to the smell. Still, the elves regarded her hopefully, thinking that they might get a beating, as usual, but that they also might get a meal and a handful of silver each. The information they brought was actually beyond price.

"The fleet was destroyed?" Bronwyn echoed them, astonished. "Completely destroyed?"

"Maybe not completely, Queen," one elf conditioned. "Word is that a few of the ships ran back to Val Royeaux." He grinned, exposing a few blackened snaggles. "Reckon they won't like what they find there."

"Reckon not," agreed his friend, staring gormlessly at

Bronwyn. He touched his forelock, remembering to look at the floor. "If it please your Queenship, we heard a few ships beached a few days away and some of the nobles got away with their horses. In Jader Bay, only a dozen chevaliers and about two dozen soldiers lived to tell the tale. They left the elves to drown." He looked like he was about to spit on the floor, and then thought better of it.

Bronwyn studied the elves briefly, and then spoke to an officer. "Take these men to the kitchen. See that they have a good dinner. Put them to work and see that they are watched." She granted her informants a brief smile. "If their story checks out, they will be rewarded very handsomely indeed."

She glanced at Morrigan and Anders, who drifted away from the crowd, and not too much later, were winging, straight as arrows, to the north.

Before dawn of the next day, Bronwyn discovered that the elves had given her Jader.

Now that the Jader Wardens had left for the west, there was no danger of Bronwyn's people being discovered by them. Anders and Morrigan, of course, could get to Jader the fastest. They could even listen to the desperate, frantic debates going on among the Marquis' deputies in the Palace Emeraude.

Jader was clearly ready to capitulate. The Wardens had told them the darkspawn had risen. and the word had spread through the city. It was obvious that the Imperial army would not be coming to Jader, but would remain in

the west to fight. The navy, with its invasion force, would not be docking in Jader Bay. Jader was quite alone, and the Queen of Ferelden had taken the key fortresses of Roc du Chevalier and Chateau Solidor. The survivors of the ship that ran aground on the Horn talked extravagantly of sieges and last stands, while the seneschal and steward clutched their heads in horror.

"And who will withstand this siege, Monsieur?" demanded the steward of the young hot-head who had led the charge up the Horn. "Who? The elves are a finger's-breadth from revolt, the dwarves have left their work and locked themselves in their houses, we have a City Guard adequate only for looking handsome in their armor, and no garrison to speak of! The Marquis did not think it necessary! Who will man the walls, defend the gates? The pampered nobles? The plump, complacent merchants?"

"I shall defend the city!" the boy shouted back. "I and my fellow chevaliers! We will defend this city to the last man and the last breath!"

The steward glared at him in contempt, rubbing his beard. "That sounds very fine, Monsieur. Very fine indeed. And what of the rest of the city, once you have made your *beau geste*, and lie dead? What of them?"

The young man stared at him blankly, at a loss to imagine anything more important than his own heroism. The thump of the seneschal's fist on the nearby table made him jump.

"My beautiful city will be sacked, you young fool! My

people will perish! They may mean nothing to you, but they do to me!" His friend, the seneschal, put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Get out of here," the man finally growled. "We need to think, and you clearly have nothing sensible to offer."

The raven outside the window remained listening, absorbing the older men's subsequent despair. When they were at last silent over some shared brandy, he flew away to report.

In bringing their troops further along the Neck, Arl Wulffe discovered the hunting lodge that Bronwyn had used as an observation post.

At least his scouts did, and they met and talked with the Avvars left there. News was brought to the old arl, and he joined them, bringing Corbus with him. Lord Rothgar was back with his own men, patrolling along the coast.

Corbus was tired, and very glad to drink hot wine under a roof, sitting by a fire, even though it was a small and shabby hut in the hills. Killer curled up by his feet, grateful for the rest. Boy and dog listened to Arl Wulffe question the men as to the Queen's recent activities.

"Heard she took the Rock! Bloody well done, that! What else has she been up to?"

Bronwyn's scouts did not know too much more, though they had heard she had gone a day's journey west to deal with the big castle by the Frostback Gates. Wulffe slapped his knee, chuckling, and then pulled out his shabby map

and showed Corbus the lay of the land. The boy nodded, seeing why it was a good idea.

"So if she takes Solidor, then we control the Imperial Highway? What about that?" He pointed to Jader, a dot and a name on the painted seacoast.

"What about it indeed, lad? Finish your drink. We need to go find the Queen. She'd be glad of some reinforcements about now, I daresay."

A messenger was sent to inform Rothgar of their movements. Rather than heading for the Pass, Wulffe decided to go ahead and cross the Neck through the Jader Bay Hills, approaching Roc du Chevalier from the other side. He really must stop there and gloat for a bit. They could rest the men and horses for the night, and then move on and join their intrepid young Queen. If she had her eye on Jader, Wulffe wanted to be in at the kill.

The Imperial Princesses found their new lives as prisoners of Queen Bronwyn pleasantly exciting. For one thing, they were not kept so entirely in ignorance. In a few days they heard more news than they had in years. Some of it was terrifying, but some it was very diverting. There had been a feast, and the princesses had been permitted to join, sitting at the Queen's table. Eglantine and Eponine had been enchanted to find themselves on either side of the handsome Bann Alistair. Celandine had not been so lucky: she had sat between the Queen and Ser Blayne Far-

aday, an old soldier. Still, neither had spoken unkindly to her, and there had been much to see and hear. Some of the Grey Wardens were quite good-looking. One of them, she was told, had noble blood.

Warden Leliana was a very different sort of *gouvernante* than the Comtesse. She would tell stories and sing songs, and she was not unwilling for them to learn something of what had been happening outside the walls of Solidor in the past seven years. She told them many of the Queen's adventures: how she had fought darkspawn and explored the caverns of the dwarven realm; how she made friends with the Dalish elves, deep in enchanted forests. The story they liked best was how she had found the Ashes of Andraste, and slain a dragon. If the Prophet had so blessed her, perhaps she could not be so very terrible. And once she washed very thoroughly and her hair was nicely arranged, she seemed more like a real Queen and less like a bandit.

"The Queen will not harm you," Leliana assured them. "Nor will she permit anyone else to harm you. She is a most merciful and chivalrous Princess. Her great goal is to defeat the Blight and to save the people of Thedas. You will be leaving Solidor soon. The Queen wishes you to be taken east, farther from the darkspawn, where you will be safer."

"But what will become of us?" Eponine did not mean to whine, perhaps, but many of her questions came out that way. "Will we remain locked up? Will we be given husbands?" She added, "I should like to have a husband."

The princesses looked at each other. They had whispered their hopes to one another over the years. Celandine was twenty-five now, and really almost too old for marriage, but Eponine at twenty-two was not ready to give up and take orders yet. Eglantine, at eighteen, was still quite eligible. They had often speculated about possible husbands. There was always their cousin, Prince Florestan, but there was only one of him. And their mother had once said that there had been quite enough marrying among the Imperial cousins. But who else was good enough for an Imperial Princess?

"A husband would very nice," Eglantine said, exploring the idea, a particular individual in mind. "Even if he was only a minor noble... as long as he was kind and handsome."

"Be careful what you wish for," murmured Celandine, who remembered the most about the realities of the outside world. "What if she gave you to a savage brute? A Wilder nobleman, wearing stinking skins? That could be worse than anything we have yet endured."

"I should like one all the same, stinking skins or not," Eponine insisted. "And I should like a child of my own. I would not care what I had to endure."

They had actually endured quite a bit, Leliana discovered. They had been fed and clothed and sheltered, but always they had lived in the shadow of the headsman's axe. The Comtesse had hated them, and they had suffered under a thousand petty tyrannies. She had made them feel like nothing: like fools, like traitors, like useless bur-

dens. She had demeaned and denigrated them at every opportunity. She took away books that gave them pleasure or useful information. She had killed their pets once they were thoroughly attached to them. She ordered meals for them entirely composed of foods they disliked. They had never set foot outside the chateau since they arrived years before. Their only sunshine and air were from the tiny garden at the top of the tower. And now, they knew that the Comtesse had always been under orders to kill them, rather than let them fall into other hands. In fact, they nearly *had* been killed, just like their dear Mamma and Papa, who had suffered so terribly before they died.

Leliana had tried to make Bronwyn understand something of what they had suffered. No, they had not fought, or slept on the ground, or been wounded; but their lives had been hard in other ways. Bronwyn granted them some sympathy for the murders of her parents, but tended to think the rest of it was fairly minor, considering how much harder it could have been.

"Not one of those girls knows what it is to starve, or be ravished, or be without a home," she said. "They need to pull themselves together."

"Not everyone is as strong as you, Bronwyn," Leliana said softly. "And the Empress did her best to train them to be as weak as possible."

They certainly were rather weak. When told to start packing, they stood about, looking helpless, not knowing where to

start. Determined to begin sensibly with them, Leliana made them sit down and discuss what they might need.

"— Our clothes."

"— Our jewels."

"— Our books."

"Yes," Leliana said, encouragingly. "But don't you think that the first thing you need is something to *hold* your possessions?"

"A trunk!" cried Eglantine, pleased with herself. "A trunk for each of us!"

"Yes!" Celandine agreed, remembering. "A trunk for our gowns, and then a chest for the books. And my lute must go in its case. If you cram too many things in a trunk, the gowns will wrinkle."

Step by laborious step, Leliana drew the princesses along, helping them grasp a little about how to plan and organize. Soon they each had a trunk and a chest, and they progressed enough to suggest that they would order their maids to pack their gowns. Leliana sighed, but it would have been hopeless to expect them to pack their own clothes. Simply being able to decide on a task and delegate it was a sort of accomplishment.

Then it was necessary to remind them that when they traveled, they would be outside in the cold for some time.

"We need... cloaks?" Eponine ventured. "We have not worn cloaks in a long, long time."

There was obviously no time to fashion elaborate cloaks for them, so the Comtesse's possessions were raided. Her ward-

robe was rather heavy on black velvet and sable, but that was not unsuitable for the season, and everything was quite rich. Best of all, they did not have to be altered to fit, since they were simply cloaks. And the Comtesse had many other nice things as well: gloves and muffs and warm fur hats. Her boots did not fit the princesses, so they would have to travel in the covered wagon, shod only in their fragile silk slippers.

The Comtesse Coqueliquot also had a small fortune in gold and lesser coin, locked in a handsome chest. Leliana picked the lock, counted the coin, and brought this to Bronwyn's attention.

"Don't give it to those silly girls. It's really the woman's, after all. No, wait. Look here, take a bit of it and give each of the girls a purse of three sovereigns in all. We'll see how quickly they fritter it away."

The girls accepted the purses gravely and studied the coins with great curiosity. They had never before carried coin themselves. It was not something an Imperial Princess did. Someone else always paid for things, they supposed: a servant, or a seneschal. Leliana sighed, and then explained how common folk earned coin; how hard they must work for even a little, and how much it cost to eat, to warm themselves, to dress in coarse garments.

"That must be very disagreeable," Eglantine agreed solemnly. "If we were not princesses, I am not sure we would be able to live."

Leliana was not a bard for nothing, and so neither laughed or wept for them... at least in their presence.

The Rock would better serve as the base for her advance on Jader, so Bronwyn planned to move back there, leaving Ser Norrel as castellan at Solidor with a decent garrison.

Her plan to release the Orlesian rank and file had hit a snag. All the Orlesians knew about the attack on Val Royeaux and were horrified. Some indeed wished to go home to their families, but quite a few felt they would be safer among their comrades, and under a reliable commander. Their sergeants passed along a plea not to be dispersed, weaponless, to the west, but to serve Queen Bronwyn, instead.

"Ridiculous!" fumed Ser Norrel. "The impudence of those Orlesian swine!"

Bronwyn was not so inclined to dismiss them. In fact, the former captain of Solidor had made a similar plea. His family lived in the Chateau. It was their home. If Val Royeaux had fallen, there was no one to ransom him; and to send his wife and children wandering into a country in chaos was to sentence them to a miserable death. Furthermore, rumor hinted that the Empress was dead. If that was so, Orlais was without a leader to defend it. Until the succession was settled – and who knew when that would be? – it appeared that service with the Queen of Ferelden was their best chance for an organized resistance to the darkspawn.

Rumor was doing its work at the Rock as well. De Guesclin was sick with fear, picturing his own family. Their

chateau north of Montsimmard was directly between the Grey Wardens and the darkspawn. He pleaded for an audience with the Queen, and was told she would be returning to the Rock within a day or so.

Before she left Solidor, Bronwyn summoned the Orlesian prisoners to the parade grounds. Ser Norrel, on her instructions, asked all those who wished to be released to go home to come forward. They would be given rations and escorted for half a day along the Imperial Highway. Once they chose to leave, they would not be permitted to turn back, on pain of death.

Over two dozen soldiers stepped out of the ranks, amidst mutterings and hissed disputes.

"Any others?" Ser Norrel shouted. "For the rest, you will remain in custody while the Queen considers your application to serve her. Good behavior is recommended if you wish her favor."

Bronwyn decided to speak. She raised her voice and addressed the Orlesians.

"I know that you are brave men who love your homeland! Some of you have family obligations that cannot be neglected. I understand and respect that. Others wish to remain under arms and fight to defend the helpless victims of the darkspawn. I would like to trust to your honor, though I have suffered numerous attacks and grievous harm from foreign agents since the Blight began. It is possible that among you are some of these Imperial agents, looking for an opportunity

to do me injury. Know this: the Empress is dead."

A shocked outcry from some, and some grim, unsurprised looks from others. A few seemed skeptical.

"Yes," Bronwyn declared. "The Empress is dead. Val Royeaux lies in ruins, and the Imperial spymasters are slain or are wretched fugitives. The Archdemon gloats over the treasure chests of the capital. There is now no one to reward a faithful agent for sabotage or espionage. It is a new world, and it would be wise to make a new place in it. While I am away, I trust Ser Norrel Haglin to treat you with justice, and I expect all of you to prove your good faith by obedience, as good soldiers should. That's all I've got to say."

An Orlesian sergeant bawled out, "*Vive la Reine Rouge!*"
"Vive!"

Bronwyn found the spontaneous demonstration rather moving. Ser Norrel only grunted.

"I can't believe you're even considering trusting this lot."

"It's not so much a matter of trust," she murmured. "It's better to have them under my command, under discipline and the threat of punishment, than fighting against us as bandits or rebels. Be fair to them." She gave him a wry smile. "Be *fair*. I'm not asking you to be *soft*."



The move to the Rock involved quite a few wagons. It also involved the appearance of the most ludicrous conveyance Bronwyn had ever set eyes on.

"That's a *carriage*, that is," breathed Toliver.

"That's a *ridiculous* carriage," Aveline said curtly.

Leliana tried to be matter-of-fact. "It is the Princesses' carriage; the one in which they journeyed to Solidor." She pointed out the heraldic features, numerous and gilded.

"Here is the Lion of Orlais, and here is the eagle of the princesses' mother, who was a daughter of another Imperial Prince. Here is the princesses' personal crest, and the wolves – here – designate heiresses-presumptive."

Bronwyn thought it the ugliest thing she had ever seen since the Paragon Caridin forged King Bhelen's crown. "And the dragons?"

"Oh! They are just for pretty... I think."

Ridiculous as it was, it held three trunks, six chests, three princesses, their maids, and assorted instrument cases. Alistair and Leliana would ride beside the carriage as guard and chaperone. As the girls emerged doubtfully from the door to the outer keep, wrapped up warmly in their borrowed cloaks, they were passed by the guard escorting the soldiers who had asked to leave. Along with them was a wagon carrying the Comtesse Coquelicot, who would be leaving with them.

Bronwyn had not forgiven her for urging the soldiers to shoot at her. She had, as a sop to decency, pointed out to the older woman that the road would likely be unsafe. The Comtesse had demanded that she be released at once; and as she was of no real use, a wagon was made available and loaded with her possessions, other than the cloaks

the girls were using and the bit of coin granted them. One of the released soldiers was assigned to her as a driver. The contrast between the rough wagon with its canvas top and the magnificent carriage was striking, and the Comtesse, clutching her horrid little lapdog close, glared at the cringing princesses with unadulterated malice.

The girls were much affected, to Bronwyn's annoyance. After the woman had vanished through the outer gates, she turned to them and remarked, "She has no power over you now. No power at all, really, other than over her dog."

"Maker grant we never see her again!" Eglantine prayed.

"You won't," Bronwyn shrugged, as Alistair handed the girls up and shut the door of carriage.

It was only too easy to imagine exactly what become of that unpleasant and foolish woman, once the party was out of sight and the soldiers remembered there were no officers watching them. The only question was how soon they would loot the wagon, down to the last copper, and if they would kill the Comtesse before or after they were done.

Bronwyn put the matter from her mind, and swung into the saddle. It was back to the Rock for her, to prepare for her march on Jader.



CHAPTER 8

RED QUEEN
IN THE
EMERALD CITY

BRONWYN WAS DELIGHTED TO FIND REINFORCEMENTS AWAITING HER AT THE ROCK. She waved at Wulffe and Corbus,

who were standing outside to greet her as she rode in.

"Well met, Your Majesty!" cheered Wulffe, brushing a groom aside, and holding Bronwyn's horse himself as she dismounted. He leaned forward to rumble low, "— and well done, dear lass!"

She clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "You're not a moment too soon. I have plans. Let's talk upstairs."

Then she put out her hand to Corbus, who dutifully kissed it. Not satisfied with that, she pulled him into a hug. "I am so sorry about your good father. He'll be missed, but he'd be so proud of you!"

She told them the news of the taking of Solidor, and then they were distracted by the huge golden carriage trundling into the courtyard in her wake. Corbus goggled at the grandeur, and Wulffe tried to pretend not be impressed by anything Orlesian.

"Maker's stones!" he grunted. "Is that the Empress' coach – or her hearse?"

"Neither," Bronwyn laughed. "It belongs to her cousins, the Imperial Princesses. The Empress had them locked up at Solidor for years and years. Harmless, silly girls, but we don't want people getting their hands on them and declaring themselves Emperors."

Alistair rode in beside the coach, and the two arls greeted him in friendly fashion.

"Good for you, lad, looking after the ladies," said Wulffe. "Wouldn't mind having a look at them myself."

Turning a bit pink, Alistair handed the timid, wondering princesses out of the coach. They had very much enjoyed their outing, though the coach had been cramped with all their luggage and servants. They looked quite ethereal: porcelain skin, pale blue eyes, and golden hair contrasting with their black cloaks. They saw Bronwyn, and dutifully curtsayed low.

"Your Majesty," they said, more or less in unison.

"Your Imperial Highnesses," Bronwyn responded with a nod. "These are two of my loyal Ferelden nobles: Arl Galagher Wulffe of West Hills, and Arl Corbus Bryland of South Reach."

Both arls bowed, Corbus a split-second after Wulffe. He was still gaping.

"Ladies," grunted the older arl, thinking they would probably cause a great deal of fuss and trouble, either directly or

indirectly. They were certainly pretty enough for it, princesses or not. Corbus blushed, and then peeked again. One of the girls smiled at him, thinking him a very sweet boy.

Not insensible to the byplay, Bronwyn grimaced, and gestured Leliana forward.

"Perhaps the second-in-command's old rooms would do for them," she suggested in a whisper. "Best to get them settled and out of sight as soon as possible. And I want a guard on the door."

"I shall see to it." Leliana assured her. She gave a smile and a nod to the arls and then called to the princesses. "If it please your Imperial Highnesses, let us go at once to your quarters, so you may rest after your journey."

"I'm not tired," muttered Eponine, a little rebelliously. So much was going on, and there were so many people here... so many men. Some of them were quite good-looking.

Celandine hushed her, and they followed Leliana. Eglantine looked back over her shoulder to give Alistair another smile. Bronwyn saw his response: a most deplorably feeble grin.

Already enamored. Oh dear. I must think about it. Perhaps it's not such a terrible idea. She's the youngest and therefore third in the line of succession. Perhaps marriage to a Fereldan noble is a good solution. Not to a bann, though. We'd have to elevate Alistair to an arl at least. Well... let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Wulffe raised his brows at her. He hadn't missed that bit of flirtation, either. She rolled her eyes, and he chuckled.

"Pretty girls," he remarked. "Any sign of sense in any of them?"

"Not so you'd notice. The Empress had it ground out of them. Their guardian was a spiteful old cow. I sent her back to Orlais, and I'm having Warden Leliana look after them. They might as well have some serious protection. The guardian tried to have them killed rather than captured."

"That's horrible!" Corbus said, feeling sorry for them, even though they were Orlesian. They were just girls, after all, and they seemed a lot nicer than Habren.

Bronwyn forbore to shame him by ruffling his hair, though she really wanted to. "Indeed, my lord arl, it was. She was a cruel woman, and they're well rid of her. How Killer has grown! Quite the warriors now, both of you." She laid her hand on Wulffe's arm, eyes full of gratitude. "and under Wulffe's tutelage, too. I could not be more pleased. Let me wash off some of the dirt, and then we'll have a talk. Alistair, let Ser Blayne know, before you join us. I'll want him there, too."

Her ridiculously grand rooms were awaiting her. Bronwyn briefly thought of putting the princesses in them, as they were probably more what they were accustomed to. More considered thought, however, prevented that. It would not do the girls any harm to learn to live a bit more moderately, at least for a little while. And Bronwyn really liked that bathtub.

Their temporary quarters were adequate, though rather small. The princesses had always had to share a bedchamber — the better to guard them — but now they would also have to share a bed. There was a brief squabble as to who

would have to be in the middle. Celandine, the mildest-mannered of them, lost, as usual.

Still it was not bad, and from the window they could see the courtyard, and the soldiers busily at work. It was very entertaining. Wanting to detain Alistair, Eglantine pursued some rumors she had heard from the servants.

"Is it true, Bann Alistair," she asked, "that you are the son of King Maric?"

Leliana winced, knowing this was a sensitive subject. She shot a pleading look at Alistair, mutely asking him to be kind. He looked away, annoyed.

The resigned, slightly sour look on his face confused the princesses. Surely it was an honor to be of the blood royal? Since Alistair was not rude by nature, he answered the princess, rather than turning his back and walking away.

"Yes, it's true," he said. "King Maric was my father. I never knew him, though. I'm a bastard, and I was raised by Arl Eamon of Redcliffe."

"Well!" said Eponine. "That is very appropriate, yes? A great noble *should* be the one entrusted with the tuition of one of royal blood."

"Is that where you earned your spurs as a knight?" asked Eglantine.

"I learned a lot living in Redcliffe," Alistair agreed, a bit more snidely than his wont. "But not that. If you ladies are comfortable now, I believe I must return to the Queen."

Leliana nearly threw up her hands in despair. The

princesses were grieved that he wanted to leave so soon.

"Oh!" cried Celandine, "You are offended!"

"Was it something we said?" asked Eglantine, in a small voice.

Alistair pulled himself together. He was being ridiculous. Maybe it was the high, Orlesian-accented voices that had set him off. Arlessa Isolde no longer had any power to harm him.

"I don't mean to be abrupt, but I don't have many happy memories of my childhood. Here's the story of my life, for what it's worth. Arl Eamon told me I was a disgrace, and sent me to live in the stables. When I was eleven, and his wife grew tired of me, I was sent to the Chantry to become a Templar. I wasn't suited to it, but at least I learned to read and write there, since Arl Eamon didn't bother educating me in anything but grooming horses. Luckily, I was conscripted into the Grey Wardens. That's where I met Queen Bronwyn. It was her idea to make me a noble."

The princesses regarded him with horrified pity. Eglantine waved her hands at such an outrage, and said, "And that was well done! How wicked to keep one of royal blood in a stable!"

"It is a crime against nature," Eponine agreed, perfectly seriously. "I hope the Queen has punished this Arl Eamon."

"He's dead," Alistair said briefly. "I used to think of him as a good man. Then I really thought about it, and changed my mind. They say children can adapt to anything, but no child should have to adapt to people telling them that they're nothing and nobody."

Leliana said feelingly, "I believe that their Imperial

Highnesses are in complete agreement with you."

"Of course!" Celandine murmured. "Did not the Comtesse say all that and more when she ruled over us? And she said other things, too: that the Empress would kill us if we displeased her; that we would be beheaded, or broken on the wheel like our father, or smothered under a featherbed like our mother."

"She was cruel," Eponine declared. "And spiteful."

Leliana was still looking at him in mild rebuke. Alistair spread his arms in surrender.

"I know I'm not the only one who ever had a hard life. I'm sorry if I was short with you."

"That perfectly all right, my lord!" Eglantine assured him anxiously. "I am sorry I was so impertinent and curious. It is just so pleasant to have friends at last."

"It is very pleasant indeed," agreed Celandine. "The Queen has been very gracious, and Warden Leliana so kind."

"She has been helping us with our music," Eglantine told Alistair. "I am sure I have improved a great deal already!"

"Why don't you play something for Bann Alistair?" Leliana suggested. She smirked as two of the princesses delicately manhandled Alistair toward a cushioned chair, while Eglantine found her lute and set about tuning it.

"Don't laugh at me," she pleaded.

"I won't laugh," Alistair assured her, even a little indignant that she could imagine him such a ruffian.

Eglantine simply looked at him with huge blue eyes, and he softened a bit. Then she smiled, and strummed

her opening cards. Her singing voice was quite pleasant: sweet, soft, and a little breathy.

*"Do you know the land where the lemons bloom?
Golden oranges grow amidst the leafy gloom.
A gentle breeze from blue skies blows.
The myrtle is still, and tall the laurel grows.
Do you know it?"*

*'Tis there, 'tis there, 'tis there,
'Tis there I would go with you, my love.*

*"Do you know the house? It has columns and beams.
The great hall glistens, the staircase gleams,
And the marble statues ask me, sad and mild:
'What have they done to you, poor child?'"
Do you know it also?"*

*'Tis, there, 'tis there, 'tis there,
'Tis there I would go with you, my knight.*

*"Do you know the cloudy mountain pass?
The muleteer picks his way through the misty mass;
In caves the ancient dragons raise their terrible brood
While the cliffs are polished by the crashing flood.*

*"Do you know it well?
'Tis there, 'tis there, that I would journey!
O dear one, let us go!"*

She finished, and looked at him so anxiously, that he felt quite protective.

"You sing beautifully," he said.

The princesses were very pleased with him, and better

pleased with their quarters, when a servant appeared with some refreshments. Leliana teasingly pressed Alistair to stay, and a curious conversation followed.

"The two noblemen we met today," Eponine began. "Are they of good estate?"

"Wulffe and Corbus?" Alistair asked, rather blankly. "Well... I suppose so. They're arls," he explained. "High nobles. I've never been to West Hills or South Reach, but they seem to have everything they want."

"Arl Wulffe is married, I presume," Celandine said softly, "and the young Arl is very likely betrothed."

Leliana bit back a smile, and looked at the floor.

Alistair, innocent of intrigue, shook his head. "No. Arl Wulffe's a widower. Been one for years, I think. Corbus is just a little boy. His father was killed only last month."

Celandine ventured, with a warning look at Eponine, "I presume that Arl Wulffe has an heir?"

"He has two grown sons," answered Alistair. "And the older one is getting married in the spring."

"Ah." Eponine sighed and shrugged. "But the young Arl is not betrothed?"

"Not yet." Alistair looked completely mystified. "Look, I really have to go. The Queen's called a council..."

He bowed and escaped, leaving the women to discuss their prospects at length. His ears would have burned if he knew what they said.

Bronwyn permitted de Guesclin to attend the dinner that welcomed her back to the Rock. As she expected, he greeted the Imperial princesses with great deference, but he also showed surprising submission to Bronwyn herself.

"I pray you, Your Majesty," he said, "to hear my petition for parole at your earliest convenience."

He looked quite desperate. Bronwyn thought he probably was.

"You may approach me in the audience chamber after dinner," she said. She nodded to his guards. "See to it."

Her mind was on Jader while she ate, but she could not help but notice the flirtations, the subtle jockeyings for power, the rivalries that surrounded her. Even among her Wardens there was friction. Alistair disliked Morrigan; Anders was annoyed with Alistair for disliking Morrigan; the Dalish were growing insular once again; the dwarves speculated about their Paragon Astrid; Aveline chatted with Silas while trying to avoid Toliver's advances; Carver had had too much to drink.

The princesses appeared to have discovered men. It was unsurprising but inconvenient. She left strict orders that they be watched. Leliana was going with Bronwyn to Jader, and the princesses would be guarded but unchaperoned for some days. Bronwyn hoped they did not run away with plausible soldiers or smooth-talking charlatans. At least the eldest was very shy, and the youngest was fixated on Alistair. The middle one was even making eyes at young Corbus, who had no idea what to make of

such behavior. Bronwyn did not care for it. Corbus was too young, and Bronwyn rather fancied the idea of matching him with sweet young Faline Kendells. That would be far more appropriate.

When she left the feast and summoned de Guesclin for the interview, she found it harder to resist his arguments than she had anticipated.

"My chateau... my home... Corbelin... it is there, on the map. My wife and children are there, between the Grey Wardens of Montsimmard and the darkspawn in Val Royeaux. Tell me: have the darkspawn marched on the Wardens?"

"I don't know," Bronwyn told him frankly. "I think not. I am under the impression that the Wardens have marched on the darkspawn. They might indeed have taken shelter at your chateau."

That did not reassure de Guesclin. "What if they decided to make a stand there? That might lure the creatures to my home!"

As that was indeed possible, Bronwyn did not try to put him off with lies.

"I am moving on Jader," she told him. "I have every reason to believe the city will capitulate, between the attack on Val Royeaux and the destruction of the invasion fleet. Once I have secured Jader, I mean to march on the darkspawn."

"Into Orlais, you mean," de Guesclin replied, looking grim.

"Yes, into Orlais. The darkspawn do not *care* about jurisdiction. If I sit here in this castle, guzzling wine, the horde

will only grow stronger and more and more of Orlais will be fouled by the Taint. They must be challenged, and immediately. I presume that you wish to defend your country."

He gritted his teeth, obviously enraged at such a patronizing remark. He restrained himself, not wishing to end up locked away in the dungeons. He gave a curt nod.

"Good," Bronwyn said. "If you will swear allegiance to me for the duration of the Blight, I will release you and your men. I will allow you to go west and fight the darkspawn — with my army if you agree, otherwise alone, though I think that reckless. There will be no ransom demand."

He blinked in surprise. Bronwyn scowled at him.

"These are not normal times, despite the way Orlais has treated Ferelden since the beginning of the Blight! It is disgusting to allow the darkspawn to ravage, whether in my country or someone else's. We can cut one another's throats when the darkspawn are defeated, if that is your goal in life."

"I will," he said instantly. He reddened in confusion. "That is, I will swear allegiance to you while this Blight lasts. I and my men shall follow you against the darkspawn. I would follow anyone who would help me return to my family. I shall support you if you march to Jader. It will be necessary for supplying the army. I can see that. How soon do we march?"

Bronwyn smiled. "We march tomorrow. Why wait?"



The Fereldan army mustered in its ranks and marched out under its banners, concealing nothing... much. Bron-

wyn still had some of her Avvar scouts posted in the hills, looking to see what slipped out of Jader; making sure it was nothing that could harm them.

Bronwyn had sent scouts and spies to Jader, but had not seen it for herself before today. It was... a great deal more impressive than she had expected. It was clearly larger and grander than Denerim. While Denerim had dazzling Fort Drakon as its signature landmark, this city had many other magnificent structures, towering high above the strong walls. From the sign of the holy flame, she could see what must be the bell tower of the Chantry — incomparably larger than that of Denerim Cathedral. And nearby, faced with greenstone, were the towers of the Palace Emeraude. It was a jewel of a city, and possessing it would make Ferelden a richer, more powerful, more *credible* nation.

In one of the supply wagons, the two Jader elves rode, purses full of gold. Their initiative had made them the richest men in the Alienage. They had picked up all sorts of useful odds and ends of information, too. The Queen knew them now, and very likely, it would be her word that carried weight in Jader from now on.

Ahead of her, Bronwyn sent a herald under a flag of truce, requesting a parley. With any luck, she could have Jader without her soldiers risking so much as a finger.

Sure enough, the gates of Jader opened, and a party of knights and men-at-arms rode out under the sea serpent banner of Jader and their own flag of truce. Bronwyn smiled,

and prepared to do battle with words, rather than swords.

The harassed, middle-aged man with pepper-and-salt hair on the good horse was presented to her as Ser Manfred de Laelos, steward of the city in the absence of the Marquis. Bronwyn thought he looked very ill, and did her best to repress an impulse of pity.

"Ser Manfred," she said, without much ceremony, "I am here to pursue my campaign against the darkspawn. I need Jader as a supply base. Thus, I am willing to entertain your surrender. Open your gates to me, and you and your people will be treated with mercy and honor."

His face contracted with veiled anguish.

"Your Majesty, your valiant reputation is known far and wide, but you cannot expect me to yield up my city without resistance."

"I do expect it, Monsieur. Indeed, I *demand* that you do so. You must know that the darkspawn have risen. As a Warden, I am sworn to fight them by any means necessary. This is no time for niceties over jurisdiction. The Imperial Army will not march on Ferelden —" she smiled coldly — as I know it planned. It is engaged in saving the lives of Orlesians further to the west. Val Royeaux lies in ruins. The navy you were expecting lies at the bottom of the Waking Sea, for the most part. I could indeed watch the process of the Blight at a distance, but that selfish and cowardly counsel would be madness. The horde must be fought and destroyed, lest it continue to grow larger and

spread like an evil flood over Thedas. Not one Orlesian was willing to aid Ferelden when the darkspawn attacked, but I, at least, will do my duty."

The man licked his lips, thinking. "If you march west, Jader will not prevent you."

Bronwyn treated that hint with the contempt it deserved. "Nor will it help me," she said. "I quite understand you. But no, monsieur, I am done with fighting the darkspawn while Orlais holds a dagger at my back. My troops will rally here and resupply. The harbor will receive the Wardens from other lands who will come to fight. I need Jader, and I will have it, one way or another."

One of the nobles was glaring desperately at de Laelos, trying to gain his attention. The steward noticed him, and cleared his throat. "With certain sureties, perhaps an accommodation can be reached."

Bronwyn looked over the gentlemen of Jader and said, "Here is my offer. Open your gates. Submit to me as your rightful Queen, and you will be treated as loyal subjects under the law, with the same rights, privileges, and duties of other Fereldan subjects. You will join my realm secure in your lives and possessions, your people untroubled and their property protected. You will join with me in the campaign against the enemies of all Thedas: the noblest and most vital struggle of our age."

Some of the nobles and knights appeared willing. Some hoped to retain their lands and titles, and others were drawn

in by the prospect of the adventure. Ser Manfred, more contained, waited for the other shoe to drop. Bronwyn flicked her gaze over the various expressions, and continued.

"Or you may choose to decline my most honorable and generous offer. You may choose to hide like cowards behind your walls, letting others face the challenge of the Blight. In that case, I must indeed move on — for the darkspawn care nothing for such petty disputes. In that case, you will face my husband, King Loghain, who is on the march with the greater part of the Fereldan army. He will sack your city and put you to the sword. So that is your choice, gentlemen: the easy way or the hard way. Admit me now, or admit King Loghain, who has no cause to love you. One way or another, Jader *will* be Fereldan. I shall I shall give you an hour to consider my offer."

She made as if to turn her horse away, while a frantic muttering broke out among the Jader envoys.

One hissed to his fellows, "We don't *need* an hour! We'd be fools to refuse!"

"— But what of those chevaliers from the BELLE AUREORE?"

"— Lock them up, if need be! Quick, de Laclos! She's leaving!"

"Wait, Your Majesty!" cried Ser Manfred. "I beg you!"

It turned out very well; very conveniently for Bronwyn. Mind you, they really had little choice, unless they wished to commit mass suicide to prove their loyalty to a dead empress. Ser Manfred and his companions returned to

the city to make it ready for her entrance, which would be at noon the following day. Very likely, they needed the time to deal with the intransigent elements in Jader itself.

"All the same," whispered Zevran, "It is best to be prepared. I do not think that this de Laclos would betray you, but who is to say that others might not attempt it? Send some of your people into the city."

This seemed good counsel to Bronwyn. A large party of Avvars, dwarves, and a few elves slipped in through the harbor side and crept through the sewers to position themselves. Anders and Morrigan flew to the Palace Emeraude to keep an eye on the activities of the steward and the seneschal. The latter had not taken part in the parley, just in case the fierce Red Queen had decided to kill all the envoys. The fact that she had not made Jader's leaders far more hopeful that she would keep her word about not sacking the city.

So the Fereldan army made camp, numerous and menacing, on the plain before Jader. There was no reason to go back to the Rock. Instead, Bronwyn had made a point of bringing every wagon and every spare war machine she possessed, to make her numbers seem greater. With what she had, she could certainly blow apart the gates and take the city, but it would mean a bitter house-to-house fight, and a great slaughter at the palace and barracks, which she would prefer to have intact and habitable for her own use. As night drew on, more units could be seen joining her, though these actually were servants and support staff,

too far away to be distinguished from soldiers. Bronwyn also ordered three times more fires to be lit than necessary, and to keep them fed and burning, knowing that there were eyes on the ramparts: eyes that she wish to impress with her overwhelming force.

The lights burned bright and late in the Palace Eméraude, too. There was a meeting of nobles, knights, and guild leaders, during which the seneschal and the steward impressed on everyone the necessity of acceding to Queen Bronwyn's demands. Even representatives of the dwarven community were summoned to attend, and they, of course, agreed that it was perfectly sensible, and indeed was the only thing to be done. A few chevaliers lamented the city's cowardice, and swore to defy the invader. They were arrested on the spot and hustled into the dungeons. If the city fathers needed scapegoats to offer in sacrifice before the Red Queen, these would do as well as anyone.

Tension in the city was at an all-time high, as the criers announced that Queen Bronwyn was entering the city at noon tomorrow, and that the citizens had nothing to fear as long as they refrained from objectionable behaviors. These "behaviors" were detailed at length, and included assassination attempts using any weapon or no weapon, shouted insults in any language, fist-waving, brawling, refusing to sell to a Fereldan, kicking dogs of any breed, or "spitting likely to cause a breach of the peace."

Disputes among the various races in the city threatened

to boil over. A great number of elves marched out of the Alienage, swaggering, shouting their allegiance to "Good Queen Bronwyn, Friend of the Elves," and waving homemade red banners made from rags dipped in rose madder dye. The dwarves, more reserved but equally sanguine about their prospects under the new regime, stayed out drinking their new Queen's health at the city's dwarven taverns. The dwarven council of elders met all night, deciding on a proper present for the Queen, to make clear her dwarven subjects' loyalty. Something red, probably. She apparently liked red.

While the human residents were unsure whether to lament or welcome their new monarch, quite of few of them set their womenfolk to sewing red banners of their own. One woman in the Market district made a tidy sum by cutting up an old red silk gown into pennants, and fastening them to thin dowels. They looked quite nice when she was done, and the coin she earned would earn her a dozen new gowns in the old one's stead.

In the Palace dungeons, a number of chevaliers fumed, but their anger was muted, in the wake of the news that the darkspawn had attacked Val Royeaux. Some were already considering offering their parole, in exchange for being permitted to leave the city and fight the monsters.

Bronwyn's army was restless with excitement. Feelings were running high. The fall of Jader was a sweet revenge. Those who remembered the Occupation — who remem-

bered their parents' stories of brutal extortion and forced labor – smirked at the idea of showing Orlesians what it meant to be a humbled, conquered people.

"Not that I don't think the Orlesians don't deserve a bit of turn-about," Arl Wulffe growled, "but it'll be harder to make use of the city if the soldiers go mad. Bad for discipline, too."

"I *hate* Orlesians," Corbus sulked. "They killed my Father."

Bronwyn gestured him over and had him sit down by her. "It's very unlikely that the citizens of Jader had anything to do with that horrible crime," she said gently. "In war, it always seems to be the helpless and innocent who suffer." She had an idea. "You don't think those princesses had a hand in it, do you?"

He shook his head, looking at the floor.

Bronwyn was gentle with him. "Of course they didn't. They were locked up as prisoners. And it wasn't the poor elves in the Alienage, either. It was the Empress and her toadies who were behind it. And some of the Empress' agents in the Chantry, too, of course. They're already horribly dead; killed by the darkspawn, and good riddance. And after tomorrow, the people of Jader won't be Orlesians anymore. They'll be Fereldans; part of our country. I think we need to start as we mean to go on. I gave my word that they would be treated with mercy, Corbus, and I can't let anyone break my word for me."

Corbus was still unhappy, but he was unhappy because his father was dead, not because he disagreed with her. If

her arguments could work on him, they might work on others as well. For that reason, Bronwyn addressed the army as they prepared for their great and bloodless victory. On the windy plain of Jader, under the blue and cloudless sky, she tried to find words of power and persuasion.

"Today we enter the city of Jader! Today we make Ferelden greater and stronger than ever before!"

There were shouts and cheers, but Bronwyn gestured them to silence, with an indulgent smile.

"The leaders of Jader have agreed to open their gates to us. They have agreed to accept me as their Queen and to accept their new status as Fereldan subjects. Today they become Fereldans – like you, my soldiers, standing before me today."

"I have been very pleased with your good service throughout this campaign. Now I ask you to once more show me your quality. You are all great fighters. The last few days have proved that to the world. Now I offer you a new challenge: to take a city without striking a blow; without looting a shop; without even knocking a fat merchant down – even if he deserves it. I need this city unravaged and unplundered. I need your strength and discipline to keep the peace in Jader, now and forevermore."

They were silent, and listening, at least. Bronwyn took a deep breath, and went on:

"Jader was not always part of the Orlesian Empire. It was founded as a humble fishing village in the days of the Tevinter magisters. As the Tevinters were pushed back, it

was, for long ages, an independent, free city. Eventually, the long arm of the Orlesian Empire stretched out and took it as a prize. Today, we liberate Jader from its Orlesian overlords. We welcome it into our realm, not as a reluctant prisoner, not as a conquered slave, but as an equal amongst our other noble Fereldan cities. From a strong, prosperous Jader, we will supply the force to challenge the newly-risen horde.”

“Therefore, we go to Jader today not as arrogant victors, slaughtering and plundering like Orlesian chevaliers; but as brothers and sisters, as true-born Fereldans, to make our kingdom strong and secure. I expect all you to join with me in treating the citizens of Jader just as we treat the citizens of Denerim, of Highever, Amaranthine, and Gwaren! As we treat honest Fereldan villagers and freeholders: with fairness and honesty; with good faith and friendship; with mercy and mutual respect. These are the qualities that make Fereldans different from the tyrants of Thedas! We come not to ravish and pillage, but to protect and defend! Thus will we enter Jader – our city!”

The cheers followed in her wake. They formed up to march through the wide gates as they slowly swung open. Men from Gherlen’s Halt went first, deserving the honor. Bronwyn was behind them, on horseback, with Corbus and Wulffe a little behind her and to either side. Alistair was a welcome and reassuring presence at her back. Along with them were the Wardens not already in the city, and behind them dwarves and elves and men, united in a great cause.

And Jader welcomed her as a favorite daughter. There were even musicians. Apparently Jader had a city band, composed of trumpets, hautboys, flutes, drums, and clashing cymbals. They blared out a fanfare that echoed to the skies, as Bronwyn rode under the greenstone-faced gate, the first Fereldan monarch ever to do so. The musicians fell into step behind the Wardens and in front of the men of South Reach. Those hardy hillmen watched them narrowly, puzzled by marching soldiers who carried instruments rather than weapons.

And the citizens of Jader, rather to Bronwyn’s astonishment, cheered her. The streets were lined with smiling, enthusiastic people, who for some reason were waving red banners. It made quite a pretty effect, especially since at the tail end of winter, there were few flowers to throw. The route planned led through the Grand Bazaar to the Place Emeraude, the site of the Chantry and the Palace. It led past the dwarven quarter and the Alienage. The steward had wished to dissuade Bronwyn for this route, especially from the dangers of the turbulent Alienage, but she felt it was an important gesture to the other peoples of Jader. She would be their Queen, too.

She smiled with careful dignity, and waved at the children. Jader was even more impressive from the inside. The Alienage was as shoddy as the one in Denerim, but the elves greeted her with enthusiasm. Her two informants jumped out of the wagon carrying them and rushed among their

fellows, with tales of the bounty of their new queen. The dwarven quarter was quite handsome, and the homes of the rich along the Voie d'Or put the noble estates of Denerim to shame. No wonder people called Fereldans barbarians.

All these sights, however, were quite overshadowed by the Grand Bazaar, with its splendid, well-built shops and brilliantly painted signs. The streets flowed toward the impressive open square of the Place Emeraude, and gradually the magnificent edifices there were revealed, a bit at a time, until she rode out into the midst of the great square, the sides of it blocked off by the City Guard, while crowds shouted and waved those incomprehensible red banners. These buildings, elegantly faced with carved greenstone, were entirely beyond her experience: a palace the like of which Bronwyn had never seen except on a very small scale in picture-books, and by the Chantry which made Denerim Cathedral look like a village chapel. She felt her face grow hot. If she did nothing else, she would find the funds to build an entirely new Cathedral worthy of her kingdom.

Everyone — steward, seneschal, Revered Mother, and guard captain — was waiting for her on the steps of the Palace as agreed, so she would go there first. A narrow red carpet led up to the doors of the Emerald Palace, which was now hers. She must make an appearance at the Chantry later, too, if only to prevent everyone taking her for a complete heathen. Being a heathen would be unpopular, even among the red-banner waving Jaderians.

The musicians tactfully moved off to the side, still blaring triumphantly, while the company from Gherlen's Halt ranged themselves on the steps both to look impressive and to be more effective bodyguards. At the approach to the steps, a groom rushed out to hold her horse, and was tactfully nudged aside by Zevran, dressed in his shining best. Her nobles and Wardens followed her, also carefully surrounding her, and Bronwyn turned to face her new subjects. She opened her arms to them, and the crowd went mad: a sea of fluttering crimson, vivid as if the streets were covered in blood.

Oblivious to her own people scanning the crowd, the rooftops, and the windows facing onto the square for hidden threats, Bronwyn basked in the welcome. This was something. She had won a great city for Ferelden — a far greater city than she had imagined — and strengthened her realm immeasurably. Once inside the palace itself, she was again staggered by the splendor, the wealth, the luxury of Orlais. She was shown the treasure chamber, and after catching her breath at the amount of gold, she took a moment to glance at the accounts. She resolved once again to do something to improve Denerim. Why hadn't the bloody Orlesians invested in some great civic works during the Occupation? It might even have made them popular.

A new Cathedral was a must, and she knew just the place to build it: on the south side of the city, where the foothills behind Fort Drakon declined toward the sea. Sections of

city wall would have to be demolished and rebuilt, but the cost would be nothing, with these strongrooms to back her. Wide South Lane would lead up to it, giving the edifice an approach and a vista that would awe and delight the pilgrim. She might rename the street Cathedral Lane. There would be room for a square in front of it, a place fit for ceremonies and reverence. She must draw up the idea.

She might even order some improvements to the Palace, though Loghain would growl about "Orlesian frippery." It was one thing for them to remain true to the sturdy, independent character of Ferelden; it was another to look like penniless barbarians. Something should at least be done with the Little Audience Chamber. And the entry hall of the Palace proper. And the thrones in the Landsmeet. They were horrible.

All this raced through her head as she strode through the magnificent, vaulted corridors and antechambers. It was much in her mind when they reached the Marquis' own throneroom, immeasurably handsomer than her own. She could not help comparing this place to the comfortable Landsmeet Chamber as she ascended the steps to the High Seat, which was gilded, inlaid with gems, and comfortably cushioned on both seat and back in sumptuous green velvet. She made a point of asking if there was a mate to the chair, since Loghain would no doubt be coming soon, and she was assured in the affirmative. The Marquise was very insistent on her rights. Or would be, when she and her children returned from Val Royeaux.

If they returned...

Very likely they were dead. If they did return, Bronwyn saw no reason to confirm them in possession. The Marquis had been given command of an army to invade Ferelden. That was not something to be forgiven. Rule of this splendid province would be given to a loyal Fereldan. She would have to have it out with Loghain as to the name of lucky new arl.

Jader would not be a teyrnir, she decided. Two teyrnirs were quite enough, for she had no desire to elevate anyone to the level of the Couslands or Mac Tirs. An arling, then. Another arling, this time in the northwest, would balance out the great nobles very well.

All this flashed through her mind, before she must speak. Not just humans were here, but also representatives of the dwarven guilds. Good, it saved time. No elves, of course, but that would change. The elves had been pleased by her appearance in the Alienage today. Tomorrow, she would summon their hahren and some of the other elders before her to discuss the issues concerning them.

The crowd fell silent as she turned toward them and spoke from the dais.

"My lords, ladies, and gentlemen! Wardens, soldiers, and wise representatives of the dwarven people! Jader becomes Fereldan today. I greet you as loyal subjects and renew my promise that you will be treated with the justice and mercy shown to the rest of Ferelden. Your rightful property remains your own. Your lives and endeavors will be

respected. Together we will continue the struggle against the Blight, protecting the weak and rallying the strong." She addressed the seneschal. "Ser Manfred: present the nobles and worthy folk of Jader to me. I stand ready to accept their homage as my true and faithful subjects."

That process lasted quite some time, with a herald bellowing out the names, and the seneschal whispering background information in her ear. Both he and Ser Manfred also told her that a number of local chevaliers were not present, but remained either in their townhouses or out in the country on their lands, not wanting to commit themselves to what some of them saw as treason. The names were recorded, and in due time, someone would pay calls on them. If they would not pay homage, Bronwyn decided, their desmesnes would go to Fereldans: leavening the Orlesian nobility with new men loyal to her.

Gifts were presented to her: a gold rhyton in the shape of a deer's head; a great deal of magnificent crimson velvet; a symbolic key to the city; a beautiful bronze statuette of a horse and knight. The dwarves gave her a pair of matching gold bracelets, nearly as wide as bracers, studded with rubies. Bronwyn was quite taken with them.

Her troops were carefully spread through the city. Some made use of the capacious barracks, and other were quartered in the Palace itself. A brief chat with the Captain of the City Guard made plain to him how very unwise it would be for his guards to pick fights with Fereldan soldiers.

A feast had been prepared, and was inspected by Zevran and Leliana for poisons. There were none. It was quite the affair. Bronwyn understood the importance of meeting and greeting, but was deeply relieved when she could withdraw to the Marquis' apartments – now her own.

These made even the Imperial Suite at the Rock look modest. There was a great deal of green, which Bronwyn liked. The rooms and connecting corridors were checked thoroughly for peepholes and hidden doors. A few were found. The family quarters of the Marquis were quite large, and accommodated all the Wardens easily, for they were composed of the Marquis' bedchamber, dressing room, bathroom, and private study; the Marquise's bedchamber (with hidden connecting door), her boudoir, dressing room, and bathroom; three rooms which had been used by the family's older children, with a joint bathroom; the large nursery and its curious and amusing bathroom; a private strongroom; the rooms of the upper servants and the bathroom used by them; a family dining room, and a family parlor.

The servants had prepared the Marquise's room for her own use, which was appropriate, Bronwyn supposed, even though she preferred the quieter, sturdier – comparatively speaking – style preferred by the Marquis. However, Loghain would be coming, and he would likely explode at the Marquise's ultrafeminine style: dainty furniture and delicate colors; fragile draperies, and tessellated floors covered by pale silk carpets. Bronwyn took it as her own,

and suspected she would learn to like it.

The exquisite bath was made in the shape of a shell. Perhaps that was appropriate for a seaport like Jader, but Bronwyn had never felt less like a rare pearl as she scrubbed off the dirt of travel. No doubt the Marquise would have shuddered at such a desecration.



Chateau Haine was fairly remote, set picturesquely on the edge of the Vimmark Mountains. There was good hunting here, a decent library, a large enough staff to provide for one's modest needs. Prosper de Montfort had always enjoyed his stays here. Now, of course, his stay promised to be of some duration. He was keeping a low profile, alert for Celene's next move against him.

It did not help his temper that Cyril was here. A man needed a son and heir, naturally; and it would have been mad to leave Cyril in Val Royeaux as a hostage to be used against his father. The problem was that Cyril *bored* him. He was not a true companion, and could not meet him in conversation, whether rational or playful. The boy, now fifteen, was just like his late mother — except for a blessed lack of piety. He was lazy and impertinent; he was arrogant and self-satisfied; he had no curiosity whatever about the world, other than to want to know — *now* — when his next meal, his next drink, and his next wench would be provided. At Cyril's age, Prosper had already mastered the Arcanum and Qunari tongues, trained a hawk, learned

the arts of sword, dagger, and crossbow, and killed his first man in a reasonably fair fight.

Cyril had tried to escape from their ship before departing Val Royeaux. He had whined about missing his friends, about missing the splendid events at the Grand Cathedral, and about missing the festivities that bade farewell to the army. Prosper had finally had to knock him senseless and throw him below decks.

The boy was *still* whining about his worthless friends. Prosper had refused all invitations to attend salons in Cumberland, wary of the Shadows of the Empire, Celene's assassins. While Orlais and Nevarra were at war, Prosper's ambiguous status as a noble holding domains in both those countries made him acceptable. His current status as an exile even made him welcome. It was a pity that it was simply too dangerous to go, for he had reason to believe that some of the young men of Cumberland were not as shallow as those of Orlais. They might have been a good influence on Cyril. The young prince, now, the king's heir — he was a hard-working lad, and nobody's fool. A son like *that* would be a son to be proud of, even if meant watching him very, very carefully, lest Prosper himself be supplanted prematurely...

One great diversion kept Prosper entertained: the curious egg that his chief huntsman had brought to him last summer. It had hatched, and the first face the astonishing creature had seen on emerging from its shell was that

of Duke Prosper de Montfort. It had become attached to him. It remembered him from visit to visit. Prosper had undertaken attempting to train the creature, for no one else to his knowledge had a pet as glorious, menacing, and potentially useful as a wyvern.

It took imagination and tact. It was not at all like training a horse or a hawk. Perhaps it was something like those Fereldan dogs, for the wyvern was a surprisingly clever creature. It gave Prosper considerable satisfaction to picture how quickly his dear Leopold could dispatch and devour a mabari.

Wyverns could not fly, but they run very fast, and could leap and glide, using their vestigial wings. Leopold had grown rapidly in the six months since his hatching, and Prosper had feared that he would try to escape. Chaining him up was unlikely to help in their bonding, so Prosper had taken the risk of leaving him free during the day; only locking him in his cage at night. Luckily, Leopold appeared to like Prosper, and could now understand simple verbal commands. Most importantly, he understood that he was not to eat humans, especially Cyril, no matter how annoying they were. Prosper was training him to attack on command, but that must be done carefully. Prosper had a dream for Leopold; a great dream that had not been realized in Thedas in two ages; not since the extinction of the griffons. Was the wyvern strong enough now? Perhaps it was time to see. The special saddle had been fashioned, and was ready for Prosper's use.

He took Leopold out to the training yard and began putting him through his exercises: to sit, to lie down, to trot in a circle around the paddock, to stretch his wings and then bound up to this or that pinnacle or tower and then return at a whistle. It was going well. Leopold liked to please him; he was far more satisfactory than Cyril in that regard.

He was deeply absorbed in training his pet, when his agent in Cumberland came racing in, his horse white with sweat. The man jumped down, and ran toward him. Something remarkable, it seemed, had happened.

Prosper listened to the news, his face blank, not letting the man see what this meant to him. He questioned him, wanting to understand every detail. It had already been clear to him that the Maker had not approved of burning his Bride's Champion in effigy. Now, the full extent of his wrath was clear. Prosper dismissed the man after a time, almost numb with shock, and then turned to Leopold, waiting patiently in the paddock.

"Leopold, my clever boy... we are going home! But before we depart, there is one last exercise we must try..."

Loghain's arrival at the Rock already had him in a mood to celebrate. The news there was better than anything he had ever imagined.

"She's in Jader?"

"That she is, Sire," Ser Blayne Faraday affirmed, his gruff face uncommonly cheerful. "Jader collapsed like rotten



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fruit. Her Majesty told the troops to behave themselves, but it's the Maker's truth: Jader is ours. They opened their gates and let the Queen ride right in."

Loghain caught Cauthrien's eye. She was trying not to grin, as elated as he was. Jader. Solidor. A border all the way to the Frostback Gates.

"Where are the Orlesian prisoners?"

"Most of them not only gave their parole; they swore allegiance to her. It's not hard to see why. With the Empress dead, who else can they follow?"

Loghain frowned, not entirely displeased, but thinking it over. He listened to the rest of the story. Bronwyn had been merciful... far more merciful than he would have been. So far, it seemed to have worked. Perhaps it was for the best that she, and not he, had been here. The chevaliers despised his origins and hated him for his deeds. Bronwyn, on the other hand, was someone they could feel comfortable with: a noble like themselves, with no long history of bitter opposition to them.

Ser Blayne roused him from his thoughts. "The princesses are here, of course. Mild young ladies. The Queen said she was thinking of sending them east, but she hadn't decided yet. She might want them in Jader, instead. Do you want them summoned, Sire?"

"Not now," Loghain growled. He had not the least desire to trouble himself with a trio of treacherous Orlesian harpies. He would very much like to see Bronwyn, but it was



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already dark, and his men were tired. "I want a good look at this fortress. Then I want a meal, a bath, and a place to sleep. I'll ride to Jader in the morning, and see the Queen."

After a shockingly good meal, he was shown the way to the Imperial Suite, where he was told the Queen had lodged. On the way, he passed the Wardens. Tara waved at him a little maniacally, as she supervised while her people carried a long and heavily wrapped object into the Wardens' quarters. Loot, obviously, but the most awkward sort. Why not just leave it at West Hill or the Aeonar itself?

The servants, clearly frightened of him, opened the doors to the opulent apartments. Loghain eyed the splendor of the place, distrustful and secretly a little intimidated. Still, the bath was... extraordinary. Those of his personal guards who were not on door duty found comfortable places to sleep. Amber settled down by the fire, and curled up comfortably, indifferent to gilded swags and inlaid marble. Endeavoring to follow her example, Loghain stretched out on the ridiculous bed, feeling a bit late to the party, but resigned to it. It was not important who had achieved this; it was only important that it *had* been achieved. Not a huge territory to add to their kingdom; but a strategically vital one.

His dreams were confused and brightly colored: a vision of a field of red poppies below him, and Bronwyn dancing through them, robed in white. He was awakened in the middle of the night by the snoring of a guard, but before

he could grope for a boot to throw at the man, someone closer had kicked him awake.

"Maker's balls, Kain! Roll over!"

Without a response, the sergeant did just that. Loghain lay awake for some time, arranging and rearranging Ferelden, trying to retrieve that vision of Bronwyn. It was just the sort of dream that he liked, but had all too rarely. As the sky lightened, he gave up on trying to sleep, and rose, exploring more of Roc du Chevalier.

The pay chests stored here were a boon indeed. Bronwyn had sensibly given the men a bounty, but it had hardly made a dent in the gold. Loghain did not think of himself as a man greedy for coin, but coin made the impossible possible. The gold would strengthen Fereldan cities; pay Fereldan troops; purchase Fereldan war engines. He had some of those spears Bronwyn had ordered from Master Wade in his luggage. He hoped Bronwyn would consider them an appropriate gift. With the gold they now had, he could purchase many more.

After a quick breakfast, it was time to move out. Cauthrien had Maric's Shield ready to march with swift dispatch. The other troops were ready as well, even the small band of Templars from the Aeonar that had joined his forces. Some of them had been sickened by the crimes committed by their fellows; some, like young Desmond, had been entirely ignorant of them until shown the hideous truth.

The Wardens were a bit slower off the mark, since Tara

was still mucking about with that huge piece of loot.

"What in the Maker's name is that thing?" he growled. "Get it loaded into the wagons, and let's be off!"

"Sorry, Loghain!" Tara called back cheerfully, not at all daunted. "It's fragile. And important."

He grunted. "It had better be."

She grinned at him, but moved her people along a little faster. Brosca glanced over at him, and whispered to Jowan. To Loghain's surprise, she approached, speaking quietly.

"Hey, Loghain. Can we talk?"

"We're talking."

"Where nobody can hear us? It's kind of important."

Deciding to indulge her, he led her into an empty room and shut the door behind them.

"What is it?"

She shuffled and fidgeted, plainly uneasy. He raised a brow at her.

"It's like this," she said. "Tara doesn't think we have any business telling you something this personal. Tara thinks only Bronwyn should tell you this, but I'll bet anything that Bronwyn won't. She should, but she won't. Jowan agrees with me."

Now he was feeling uneasy. What had happened to Bronwyn? "Tell me what?"

"About two months ago, after you left, we were working on that observation post in the Deep Roads near Solidor. We told you that Jukka bought it there, right?"

"You mentioned he was killed in a rockslide."

"Yeah, that's right. Bronwyn was close by, and she got buried too, and hurt pretty bad..."

He was now fairly alarmed. "How badly?"

"Well... she lost the baby. You know how she is, toughing things out and not fussing about wounds, but it hit her hard. There wasn't anything Anders could do, since it took time to dig her out. I just thought you should know. She's accomplished a lot, yeah; but she's had a hard time, too."

Loghain leaned back against the wall and blew out a breath. A baby? She had never told him she was with child. Perhaps she had been waiting for the perfect moment, and it had passed her by. The thought of her lonely suffering was painful to contemplate.

"I'm glad you told me. Bronwyn probably would not have said anything." He opened the door, and let the little dwarf through first, partly so she would not see his face.

No, very likely Bronwyn would say nothing. She was proud, and hated to seem weak. She probably hated anything that smacked of pity as much as he did. Perhaps she would even perceive this as a personal failure. It grieved him to think of her disappointment. He had hoped he was done with the crushing sorrow of miscarriages, but he had been wrong.

Well, that was all the more reason to be done with this war. They had achieved all the goals he had dreamed of. Jader was Fereldan. Orlais was occupied with the Blight. Perhaps it was time for Bronwyn to rest on her laurels.

First, though, he wanted to see the new territory she

had won for them, and to make clear his own admiration for her accomplishments. They soon moved out in good order, and traveled along the Imperial Highway, down toward the broad coastal plain. There to the north, like a painted city by a painted sea, was Jader. Its tall towers flew Fereldan banners. They turned off the Highway toward the city, speeding up a little, eager to see more. The walls were impressive; far better than Denerim's. Loghain was heartily glad that a siege had not been necessary.

The guards saluted, puffed up with self-satisfaction. He smiled back wryly, feeling they deserved to be pleased with themselves. An officer fell in with them, and led them through the streets, pointing out the sights. Runners were sent ahead to inform the Palace of his arrival. Apparently word had got out who he was, for the human Jaderians were scurrying out of sight. The dwarves and elves, however, were coming out and cheering, perfectly friendly.

That was something to consider. Dwarves and elves were not always, strictly speaking, Orlesian – not unless they had personally bought into the culture and customs. Some did, like the upper servants who aped the manners of their masters, but the Alienage elves seemed pleased at the change of regime, and the dwarves were being sensibly pragmatic about it. It would be something to build on, in trying to keep this distant city loyal to Ferelden.

He had a great deal on his mind, and did not take much note of the splendor around him. Yes, it was grand, just as

every Orlesian object and person had to be grand, but at the moment, Loghain simply wanted to see his young wife, and assure himself that she was all right.

There was the Palace, overlarge and overdecorated. Ridiculous name, Palace Emeraude. They would divest themselves of Orlesian affectations starting today. It was green, so they could call it the Emerald Palace. And there on the steps, surrounded by men in armor, was a straight and slender figure in red...

He leaped from his horse, and made straight for her. What a fine girl she was, and like all the women in his life, far better than he deserved. Without foolish ceremony, and much to her surprise, he swept her into his arms and kissed her soundly, not caring what the rest of world might think.



CHAPTER 9



BEYOND BORDERS

EANDRA BRYLAND HAD NOT EXPECTED TO RETURN TO DENERIM SO SOON. Less than a month in South Reach had

proved quite enough.

Her reception – and her daughter’s – had been markedly cooler on her recent visit than it had been when taken there by dear Leonas, who had been so very popular in his own arling. The late arl’s ashes were interred in the South Reach Chantry: Our Lady of Light. Revered Mother Damaris had given Bethany some very hard looks, for it was common knowledge that the arl had been killed – in part at least – because of his progressive views on mages. Nor was she the only one. Perversely, a great many people blamed Bethany for his death.

“Mark my words, if he hadn’t tried to please that new wife of his, he’d be alive today.”

People did not care if she heard such cruel words. Bethany grew more and more uncomfortable there. She did not feel welcome in the Chantry. Nor did she feel comfortable in the

small town of South Reach, down the hill from the castle. People stared at her, and made the sign against evil. Sometimes they spat. They did not dare refuse to sell their goods to her, but there was, quite honestly, little there that she wanted.

Their whole party was out of spirits. Lothar missed his brother Corbus horribly, and acted out on occasion. No one had ever seen him so willful and bad-tempered as he was now. He complained of having nothing to do, and clung to Charade, wanting to practice archery or go hunting.

Charade confessed to Bethany that she wished that she and Rothgar had run away and eloped, so she could have gone with him on campaign.

"Who knows how long he'll be gone? It's ridiculous, sitting around here. Between the steward and the housekeeper, there's nothing left to be done but work on my wedding clothes. Ugh."

"They're very nice wedding clothes. A good thing we bought all the materials in Denerim, though."

"I hate sewing," Charade said flatly. "I swear, once I'm married I will never pick up a needle again, so hear me, Maker!"

Bethany laughed, a little ruefully. "I doubt that you'll need to."

It was only too true that they had little to do. They were in mourning, of course, which made lively entertainments improper and disrespectful to the arl. Leandra, deeply grieving for her kind husband, had gone to South Reach with every good intention of doing her best as her little stepson's regent, but the fact was that she had little experience in administer-

ing a large household, much less an arling. The steward, who had been perfectly affable when the arl was alive, now looked with suspicion on his widow, apparently concerned that she would plunder South Reach for her own benefit and that of her children. He was a loyal man, but not loyal to her. Instead, he held out for the rights of the absent young arl, whom he regarded as his rightful master. He was kind only to Lothar, taking him on a brief visit to his future bannorn, of which Leandra, naturally, was also the regent. He was carefully civil to Charade, as the future wife of a decent young nobleman. With Leandra and Bethany, however, he was distant and formal. The housekeeper was no better, and took any interference by Leandra as an insult. Dismissing them would cause more problems than it would solve, for they were earnest, hard-working people who knew their duties, and would be incredibly difficult to replace.

It was not surprising that by the fourth of Drakonis they were back in Denerim. By the time Bethany returned, she had a good idea about what she wanted to do.

She was up early on the morning after their return, and took a long walk alone, muffled in a plain cloak. Her mother would have hated to know she was going alone and unprotected, so Bethany did not tell her her plans. She walked to the Market District, a heavy, old-fashioned key in hand, to see the house that had been bequeathed to her. The arl's seneschal in Denerim had told her something about it when she asked for the key.

"The last tenant was a foreign woman who ran off without paying for the quarter, leaving the place a filthy mess. Must have thrown wine on the walls to leave them so stained. The arl told me to have it freshly white-washed and the floors scrubbed down. Renting it out will bring you a steady income. I trust you'll find it all in order, Mistress Bethany."

The sun was low, and the city walls cast chilly shadows. Nonetheless, she liked the look of the house, close to the shops, a few steps from the Chantry, easy to find. It was in Thread-needle Alley, a tiny cul-de-sac, and the best house there.

The lock clicked open readily enough, and smelled recently oiled. Bethany mentally thanked the seneschal, who was far nicer to them than the people of South Reach. She stepped into the house and took stock of her property.

Oh! If they had had such a house in Lothering, they would have thought themselves well-off, indeed! It was charming. The anteroom had small, high windows, letting in light. It was furnished with benches, which would serve well for what she had in mind, and also with chests and a wardrobe, which would not. The walls were plastered, and yes, newly whitewashed. It smelled pleasantly fresh, though it would need a bit of dusting. She opened the door in the middle of the opposite wall, which led to a delightful parlor, larger than the anteroom, and with a cozy arched fireplace at the far end. There were good-looking wool rugs on the floor, woven in bold Gwarenian patterns. Parts of the walls were covered with handsome oak wainscoting. The ceiling rose to a peak,

and the mullioned, triangular window was also high, above the level of the anteroom roof. Good light. She would need to be able to see to do her work properly.

The room was furnished with long couches covered in canvas and deerhide, a table with a chess set, and a pair of bookcases still filled with books. Bethany clenched her hands in her excitement, hoping there was something good to read there. She would need very different furnishings, but she had coin of her own now.

Yes, coin of her own. She had briefly pictured some things at Bryland House she could use, but discarded the notion. That was as good as stealing from Corbus. Everything she needed she would order from a carpenter, and then pay for it herself. It would be hers.

To the left was a bedchamber with its own fireplace. It contained a fine, curtained bed, a cupboard, a wardrobe, and a big iron chest that proved to be empty, save for a few unpaired stockings. They were silk. Their prior owner must have been a woman of property. The bed looked comfortable. Bethany felt an aching desire to throw herself on the bed and hide in this darling little house, only coming out to buy food from the street vendors and to visit the Wonders of Thedas.

But she had not seen it all. To the right of the parlor was the kitchen, which had its own oven for roasting and baking, as well as a fireplace for other cooking. There was a stone tub, for laundry and bathing. The foodstuffs had been cleaned

out, but it would be easy enough to restock. Perhaps she should get a cat, to ward off mice. Perhaps she should have two cats, to keep each another company. A giggle escaped her. In this house, she could have all the cats she liked. She could be a old cat lady, reading her books, playing her lute, and baking her own bread. It sounded lovely.

There was a pantry, too, with a woodpile and two large kegs of what turned out to be quite decent wine. Bethany thought the pantry excessive, considering the size of the kitchen. With a little work, this could actually be turned into a decent little sleeping room. There was a ring in the floor, and a trapdoor opened to reveal some musty wooden stairs to a cellar. Not having a candle at hand, Bethany decided to put off exploring the cellar... until someone else was with her. It was a little creepy. She lowered the trapdoor and pulled one of the empty shelves over it, knowing she was being silly.

I wonder if there's a loft.

That might be hidden, too. Sure enough, she discovered where it must be, above the kitchen. It was probably small, since the ceiling of the parlor was too high to allow a loft to cover the entire house. Bethany puzzled over that, since the building on the outside seemed to have a straight roof. A brief check showed there was also a small loft above the bedchamber. She had seen a ladder in the anteroom, but she would need a chain or a rope to fix to the hooks. Maker only knew what was up there. She would want to bring some dust sheets to spread over the furniture, because it would certainly be filthy.

But this was hers, all hers, and it would do very, very well. Now it was time to consult someone who had the power to make her plan succeed or fail.

The Grand Cleric Muirin was startled to find that the young woman seeking audience with her was Mistress Bethany Hawke, the late Arl Bryland's mage step-daughter. Though she was a lightning rod for debate about the changing role of mages, she had always seemed to Muirin a very sweet girl. She curtsied nicely, and sitting in the visitor's chair, looked much like any young initiate or lay sister who was hoping to talk Muirin into something.

"Your Grace," Bethany began hesitantly. "There is something I would very much like to do, but I don't want to shock people, or make them feel they are doing wrong, or something contrary to the Chantry..."

Muirin raised her brows. Bethany struggled on.

"In fact, I hope you like the idea, because I think it would be best for me to have some Chantry supervision. Not that I'm dangerous," she hurriedly assured Muirin. "But people might think I am, and if I had supervision, then people would feel safe, which would make them happier and more comfortable. I don't want to be seen as making some sort of political statement. I have nothing to hide. I've never used forbidden magics. My father made me promise that my magic 'would serve the best in me, not that which is most base.' And it wouldn't cost the Chantry anything, because I already have

a place for it, and I can pay for the things I need."

"My dear child," Muirin stopped her. "Perhaps you should tell me exactly what it is you wish to do."

A little later, Muirin sent for Ser Otto. She could think of no one better to be the Chantry's representative at a free clinic in Denerim Market, only a few steps away. The rich had their own household healers. Now the rest of Denerim would have the benefit of magical healing, too.

While the young girl and the gentle-voiced Templar talked, Muirin got up and looked through her window at the Market below, deeply moved. It was a splendid idea, and it was a disgrace that no one had thought of it before now, or dared to suggest it. Were the theologians in Val Royeaux so pitifully afraid of anything that might make mages look useful? What would the Divine say, if she knew? Muirin did not care. She must leave for Val Royeaux soon, and would face the storm when it came. However briefly this clinic lasted, it would be a blessing for the people of this city.

Ser Otto was quite taken with the plan, but he was an idealist, and it would naturally appeal to him. He suggested that they make regular visits to the Alienage as well, since the people there might be hesitant to come to the market. They even discussed if the presence of a lay sister might not be desirable. Sister Ursula knew something of healing, and might be of great assistance in the work. She was a hearty, good-humored widow, who had joined the Chantry because she had had nowhere else to

go after losing her husband and home. Muirin nodded absently. They were working it all out very nicely between them. They needed nothing but Muirin's approval, and she was quite inclined to grant it. She liked it all the better for the fact that the Divine would denounce it.

Might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. Or burned.

Ser Otto was eager to see the future clinic for himself. The girl explained her current limitations with the cellar and lofts. Ser Otto told her they would take his friend Irminric with them, along with a lantern and a length of rope. Muirin told them to take that gangly boy Ser Kevan with them, too. He was a willing lad, and strong enough to carry firewood and draw water, at least.

It was later in the day, well past noon, when a king's messenger arrived, giving her the news of the dreadful thing that the darkspawn had done. Muirin wept for the destruction of so much grandeur and beauty, and prayed for the dead. She would not be going to Val Royeaux, after all. Her trunks, half packed, were emptied, and she spent the night on her knees before the statue of Andraste, hardly able to form a coherent prayer, ashamed of herself to be so relieved by her own deliverance.

News spread through the streets. It was rather like a festival on one hand, and a wake on the other. While it was unreasonable to expect Fereldans to show pity toward the Empress, Muirin held a solemn memorial service to commemorate the innocent dead and the destruction of the Grand Cathedral.

A thread had broken, the strong tie that had bound her to the Divine and the central authority of the Chantry. The Divine might well be dead, and certainly a great many of the powerful figures of the clergy as well. The Lord Seeker, the Knight-Vigilant, the Knights-Divine... some at least would have perished. No one would know for quite some time. By the power of the Maker, the Fereldan Chantry was now on its own, for good or ill. Muirin shivered under her heavy ceremonial robes, bowed down by the terrible responsibility.

A few days later, further news came: a secret message that relayed the shocking story of her own and the Queen's burning in effigy and the lightning damage to the Grand Cathedral, Muirin was glad that she had held the memorial ceremony beforehand, for she found herself somewhat out of charity with the Divine. As it was, the Maker had spoken. Rather loudly, in fact.

She was very glad that she had approved the clinic. She was even happier that she would be here, in Denerim, watching over it.



"But darling!" Leandra protested. "How will you have time to attend salons and dinners with me if you're at that *clinic* of yours all the time?"

Bethany had suspected this would be the hardest fight of her life. Too bad she was right.

"There's no point in showing me off like some sort of noble catch, Mother," Bethany said. "I'm a *mage*. No noble-

man – *no one* in his right mind – would marry me. This clinic is something of *mine*. Nobody else can do it. The Grand Cleric has approved of it. It's a way of reconciling mages and Chantry. It's a way of doing real, practical good for the people of Denerim. My only other choice, as I see it, is to join the Wardens like Carver. Would you prefer that?"

"Oh, Maker! No!" Leandra tugged on her hair, obviously worried and frustrated. "That's much too dangerous! I don't see why the Queen couldn't leave Carver in Denerim with those dwarves... But this is dangerous, too! Leonas was killed by a man who hated mages! You'll be alone among strangers. If only Adam were here..." she paused. "... or Carver..."

"They're not," Bethany said, feeling a bit cruel. "They have their own lives now. I want my own life, too. You have Lothar to take care of and Charade to show off at the salons. She's better at all that than I ever could have been anyhow."

"Oh, Bethany..." Leandra's voice trailed off, tears standing in her eyes.

"No! No pity! I can't stand it when you look as if you're sorry for me!"

Now Leandra was crying in earnest. "At least let me help you!"

Bethany bit back her reply. Yes, she would like to do it all by herself. Still, she could show the house to her mother, and let her see how nice it was. Maybe that would help reconcile her to the plan.

It worked out fairly well. Leandra insisted on traveling by carriage with an escort, even though it was not a long

walk. Mother was an arlessa, after all. They found the house unlocked and Sister Ursula and Ser Kevan hard at work.

"But this is delightful!" Leandra cried. "What a pretty little house!"

Proudly, Bethany showed her every detail, especially the altered parlor, where four cots had been delivered. These were sturdier and higher than regular cots. In the bedchamber, in addition to the big bed, were a little writing desk and a chair and a birthing stool of Bethany's own design. She had helped her father deliver babies, years before, and was excited about using some of his ideas. She had decided on using the bedchamber for childbirth, both to give the new mothers more privacy, and because they might make a great deal of noise. Most mothers would choose to have their child at home, but Bethany had seen many cases in the old days when a terrified young mother-to-be appeared on their doorstep — a girl who had been thrown out by her family and spurned by the child's father. Something of the sort was bound to happen here.

Work was being done on the pantry. Lathe had been put up for plastering and whitewashing. A narrow window had been drilled into the wall, and was already glazed. It did not let in a great deal of light, but any natural light was infinitely better than none. It would be furnished with a single bed, and the chest and wardrobe that had stood in the antechamber.

They had a little more work to do before the clinic was ready to open. The lofts had proved to be full of nothing but trash:

moth-eaten rugs and rat droppings. Bethany took that to heart and found a mouser in need of a good home. Sister Ursula liked cats herself and thought Pyewacket a good investment.

The cellar was filthy as well. Bins of what Ser Otto thought might be rotten turnips vied with rusty, jagged-edged pails for the description of the most unattractive rubbish. It smelled of damp and decay. The floor was earth, and rough. Otto thought that having some men lay tile or brick there would make the place more tolerable. There were opened sacks of quicklime and a shelf with a few forgotten jars of honey: ancient, cobwebbed, and wax sealed. Theoretically, honey never spoiled, so Bethany made a face, wiped them off, and carried them upstairs. Honey was a good salve for wounds, and prevented infection.

Mother was even more reconciled to the idea of the clinic, when Bethany told her she would not be sleeping there, but at home at Bryland House. Sister Ursula, however, would stay there at times, rotating with Ser Otto and Ser Irminric, who was quite taken with the whole concept himself. The plan for the single bed in the little bedchamber was altered to a very well-built, comfortable, and *long* set of bunk beds. Otto and Irminric were quite tall men.

And Mother did have one very good idea, after they went home and she had time to think. She decided to hold a salon, and invited all the notable residents of Denerim, as a way of announcing her return to the city. There, they could talk about the clinic, first as a wonderful idea in itself, and

second, as one sanctioned by the Grand Cleric. The Chantry personnel were invited to attend. Even the Grand Cleric agreed to make an appearance.

"I hope Habren comes," Leandra fretted. "Surely by now she's able to cope with social gatherings. Either that, or we really must call on her, Bethany. Anything else would look odd and unfriendly. Lothar ought to see his sister, if she is unable to come to us."

But Habren did not come. Despite Leandra's warmly-written invitation, Arl Kane arrived, attended only by his little sisters, who were wild to see dear Arlessa Leandra. While the girls hugged Leandra and Charade, Kane took Bethany aside.

"Your mother's set on seeing Habren, isn't she?"

"Well... yes. She's her stepmother. She feels it's her duty."

"Fine woman, your mother. Good to the girls. Always liked her." His too-handsome face knit in a frown. "Look here, I agree that someone should see to Habren. She's not right. I'm not sure the boy should come, though. It might be get ugly."

Bethany stared. "What's wrong? Habren's very ill?"

Kane spread his hands, his expression calculated to display what a devoted young husband should feel when concerned about his expectant wife. He lowered his voice.

"She's... not right. She gets so upset and hysterical. She attacked Faline's little puppy – tried to throw her out the window! – and she hurt the governess, too, one time when I was out of the house. Warden Jowan saw her awhile back, when I had to break the news about her father, and he gave

her something to calm her; but he said that she couldn't take that all the time. Maybe you should come... perhaps with your mother and Lady Charade. If she could behave herself, I wouldn't have to have her watched so closely. If you're there, you can keep her from hurting herself."

Now quite alarmed, Bethany sputtered in confusion. "I'll certainly... discuss this with Mother. Could we come today?"

"Before sundown," he suggested. "Habren sleeps at odd hours. I know I can trust you not to spread this about. Imagine how it would hurt all of us... hurt the child... if word got out that his mother was... *mad*."

He was called away by one of his many admirers, and Bethany was left to digest this very serious news. She disliked Habren fairly intensely, but if she needed healing of any sort, of course Bethany would help. And perhaps her behavior might be somewhat forgiven, if it was caused by a mental illness... perhaps grief over the death of her father. Bethany tried to put it from her mind for the moment, while smiling for her noble friends.

Everyone was saying such kind things about the clinic, vowing to tell everyone they knew, offering financial support and gifts. A few people carefully expressed their concern about Bethany overworking herself, since she would be the only Healer there. It was a very broad hint that she should have skilled – *magical* – help, but so far, no one was willing to make the point outright.

They all went to the Arl of Denerim's estate in the carriage. It had been decided that Lothar would visit Faline and Jancey while the ladies paid a call on Arlessa Habren.

"I don't want to see Habren anyway," Lothar declared. "I *hate* Habren."

"Lothar, darling," Leandra admonished him, "you mustn't say such things about your sister."

Bethany and Charade shared a look. Lothar remained defiant, and turned away from them, staring out the window at the streets.

He whispered, "But I *do* hate her. Why couldn't she have been killed instead of Father?"

Leandra sighed, and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. She was relieved that he did not shrug it off.

"We won't be there long," she said. "Habren isn't well, and Bethany will see if there is anything we can do for her."

"All right. At least there'll be *someone* to play with."

Charade said, "Faline and Jancey were pretty excited about having a visitor. They'll probably have treats. Don't ruin your supper!"

He grinned wickedly over his shoulder. Charade laughed at him.

The Kendells were waiting for them in the reception hall. Faline and Jancey were bouncing with delight. Kane greeted them in his friendliest way, ruffling Lothar's hair.

"Hello, little brother!"

Lothar scowled, but managed a polite bow.

"My lord Arl."

Bows and curtsies were exchanged, and mild gossip about the improving weather. Kane was planning an outing to Dragon's Peak, since his duties were not of the sort that would prevent any pleasure of his. He was quite at the disposal of the South Reach ladies.

Truth to tell, he was secretly annoyed that these women would meddle in his private matters, but they were not doing it out of spite. Very likely they would never have troubled their heads about Habren, had they not thought it was their duty. For that matter, young Lady Charade looked like she'd rather be anywhere else. He trusted his luck, which had not yet failed him, and even more to Habren's complete inability to behave decently to anyone.

"I told her you were coming, and that she ought to see you," he sighed, playing the worried husband card. "I'm glad a proper Healer's going to have a look at her."

The women glanced at each other, very concerned. Bethany had told them about Habren's deranged behavior — especially about the attack on the puppy, which was certainly beyond the bounds of sanity.

"Meanwhile," Kane suggested, "why don't Lothar and girls go and have a pleasant time? Mistress Manda's planned some fine games!"

Lothar trudged off, as if going to a funeral, but most of that was pretense to make everyone sorry for him. Once the children were gone, Kane's face became grave, and he led them down the long north hall, speaking quietly.

"Let me go in first, and get her used to the idea. Wait here."
 "Of course," Leandra agreed. Once he was out of sight, it occurred to her that Kane's manners were atrocious – worse even than Loghain Mac Tir's – but his handsome face let him get away with things no plainer man could. Of course, much of that was due to his upbringing...

"All right." Kane was back. He grimaced uneasily. "This is not one of her good days."

He gestured them through the door, and shut it behind them softly.

Habren's pregnancy was not yet advanced enough to show, but her appearance had altered a great deal from the last time they had seen her. Her hair was straggling and greasy, her gown wrinkled and unclean. She took a deep breath, and then rushed at them, eyes wild.

"Let me out of here!" she shrieked. "Let me out of here!"

The three ladies gaped, utterly taken aback. Habren threw herself at Leandra, shaking her by the shoulders, ripping her lovely purple gown.

"Do you hear me?" she roared. "I demand that you inform the Landsmeet that my husband is keeping me a prisoner!"

"Now, now," Kane said mildly, detaching Habren's hands from the shocked Leandra; gently interposing himself between the women now that the damage was already done. "That's no way to behave to your good stepmother."

"Stepmother!" Habren barked a bitter laugh. She turned to Leandra and snarled out her words. "Listen, you gold-

digging hag, I want you and that abomination over there – " she pointed at Bethany, who gasped " – to tell everyone how I'm being treated!"

Charade lost her temper. "How dare you, you crazy bitch! Don't you talk to my family that way! You tried to throw a puppy out the window! You may be noble, but you're not *normal*. So sit down and shut up!"

"Charade, don't!" Leandra pleaded.

Habren, red with rage, lunged at Charade, who seemed quite ready to punch her.

Bethany cried, "Kane! Catch her!" and cast a sleep spell on Habren. It struck, and the furious woman slumped. Kane caught her easily, and carried her over to her rumped bed.

"She's like this sometimes." He sighed. "I don't know what to do. She's going to hurt herself, or someone else, or the baby. If her father were here..." He shook his head dolefully, trying not to overdo it.

"She shouldn't be alone," Bethany said. "You should find someone to sit with her and talk quietly to her. Someone..." She thrashed about for a good idea. "Someone strong. Maybe a lay sister from the Chantry?"

"I'll find someone," Kane said, showing his fine white teeth. "That's a wonderful idea. It's important to be keep this quiet. She may get better someday, and she'd be so ashamed..." He had already decided to hire a well-paid female guard. Maybe two. Strong? Absolutely. Habren had tried to cut him with a sharpened pendant only a few days ago.

Bethany did not expect Habren's conduct to improve, since it seemed all of a piece with her usual conduct. Habren was still Habren, only frighteningly more so. Still, she had a duty as a Healer, and checked the sleeping woman out carefully.

"The baby seems fine," she told Kane. "And Habren too, though all this agitation isn't good for her. I'll come by every week, and of course you can always call on me if there's an emergency..."

"I knew I could," Kane said, with artless gratitude. He led the ladies away, his spirits dancing. "We're family, after all. Why don't you stay for some refreshments so the children have more time to play?"



"There's absolutely no reason not to return to Denerim," Fergus told his beautiful new wife. She was glowing with happiness. They were both glowing with happiness. The darkspawn had risen in the far, far west of Thedas, the Empress was dead, the Chantry unable to further chastise Ferelden, and the vaunted Orlesian navy was at the bottom of the sea – or in port, as prizes held under Ferelden colors. Some of them were here in Highever, being given new names. Captain Isabela had thrown quite the party on the biggest of her new ships.

Anora threw her arms around Fergus, unable to contain herself. Yes, it was horrible that the darkspawn had risen, and no doubt all sort of innocent people had suffered, but they were not *Fereldan* people. Ferelden, instead, had fought

off the darkspawn so bravely and so intrepidly that the monsters had gone elsewhere. Word had come that the Rock had fallen to Bronwyn, rendering Gherlen's Pass secure.

"I do hope," Anora said tartly, after a long kiss, "that the rest of Thedas will wake up and start doing its duty. Why should Ferelden defend Orlais? They did nothing for us, Maker knows. And now we are safe!"

They had made an appearance at the party on the docks, and had come home to a pleasant supper, among good friends in the largely repaired dining hall of Castle Highever. There was still a great deal of work to do – many improvements to make, for that matter – but the castle was livable. They were happy enough in the splendid bedchamber that had been the retreat of the Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever for ages past. Anora had some ideas about redecorating here, and Fergus was glad to indulge her. Their marriage had been clouded by the assassination and the funeral of Arl Bryland; by the horrific execution of his murderer; but their honeymoon in Highever was everything they desired. Anora learned every street of her new city, and together they made plans to beautify it. They rode out into the country and up into the Coast Range and to the Cliffs of Conobar. They visited humble freeholders and newly-made banns alike.

Howe's ill-gotten gains, which Fergus had retrieved from his siege of Vigil's Keep, were making change an effortless matter. The damage done to the family rooms made it imperative to order newer, finer furniture; to cover



CASTLE HIGHEVER



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stone walls with wainscoting; to purchase new carpets; to set the weavers to making new hangings and linens.

Bronwyn's old room was almost entirely changed, only keeping the splendid old bed. It was still mostly in green, Bronwyn's favorite color. Fergus hoped that she would visit, at some point. She had been there... she had seen what was done... perhaps the pain was still too great.

He was not able to enter the room he had once shared with Oriana. He had left it entirely to Anora, who ordered it largely gutted, save for the glorious carved woodwork. It would be their child's nursery, when a child came. The walls here, too, would be wainscoted in places and plastered elsewhere, with a partitioned sleeping alcove for the child and his — or her — nurse. And there would be a child. It was too early to tell now, but they were both absolutely confident that so much diligent activity could not be in vain.

The huge hall into which all the family rooms faced was deemed by Anora to be entirely wasted space. She had purchased a wonderful table and chairs for the room, and a handsome huntboard, carved with game, so the family could use the area as a private dining room. She had also commissioned paintings to hang there. The one of Fergus and Anora was almost complete. The large formal dining hall downstairs and the Great Hall were also in the process of improvement, and spectacular tapestries had been ordered to adorn them.

The maid was dismissed, so Fergus could brush out his wife's shining golden locks himself.

"There are plenty of good reasons to return to Denerim, for that matter," he said. "The Tevinters might arrive very soon, and we must be ready for them."

"Oh, yes," Anora smiled, thinking of the surprise the slavers were likely to have. "I agree we should go. I'd like to see the rooftop garden at Highever House made ready for the spring. Besides, I'm not at all sure Kane is quite up to the challenge of dealing with our foreign 'guests.'"

"I'm not sure he's up to *any* challenge... but enough of other men in my bedchamber!"

She laughed like a young girl as he tossed the brush aside and took her in his arms again.

"Greagoir," First Enchanter Irving gently remonstrated. "Brooding won't help. You need to eat something. That broth looks quite good..."

The Knight-Commander of the Fereldan Circle mumbled an indistinct answer, his head in his hands, slumped over his cluttered desk. Irving grimaced, and moved the bottle of brandy from the desk to a cupboard, and then shut the door without a noise. He sat down in the chair opposite, gazing in compassion at the man who was both enemy and companion of his old age.

He cleared his throat. "Many have died, but we still live. We can could do much to help the fight."

"M too *old*," Greagoir groaned, still rather drunk. "Old and bloody *useless*. They're all dead."

"We're too old to dash into a fight, perhaps," Irving agreed, "but not too old to train and encourage. Our young people need us." Personally, he did not think he himself was too old at all, but perhaps it would help Greagoir pull himself together if he thought he was not alone. They had serious work to do. The Grand Cleric had sent them orders, and Irving, from reading the letter upside-down, had discovered them to be astonishingly agreeable. Without Val Royeaux looking over her shoulder, perhaps Grand Cleric Muirin would prove the leader the Chantry here in Ferelden needed. She had been remarkably open-minded at the conclave.

Of course the news from Val Royeaux was what had crushed Greagoir's spirits. He had friends there, after all. A lot of friends. Of course, most of them were retired Templars, spending their last years mindless and drooling in the Templar Hospice, but Greagoir remembered them as able and devout men and women. Irving thought that death was better than such an existence, but mages looked at life and death quite differently than members of the clergy. One must not be too downhearted about death. It could strike a mage at any moment. Irving knew people at the White Spire, the Circle of Magi in Val Royeaux. He was very sorry if they were all dead, but they would have died hereafter, one way or another. They could die like Wynne, murdered out of spite for no real reason at all. Or they could be killed out of hand for looking the wrong way at a Templar. Or the Chantry could arbitrarily decide to Annul a Circle, and that was the

end of all the mages in it, the innocent and guilty alike. In this particular case, the Orlesian Circle had been Annulled, so to speak, by the darkspawn. Bad things happened to good people. Good things happened to bad people. There was no justice, Irving was convinced, under the sun. The First Enchanter was in fact a secret agnostic, not at all convinced of the existence of the Maker. If He did exist, Irving thought, He should be thoroughly ashamed of Himself. Thedas must have been created on one of His off days.

"Does the Grand Cleric have any task for me?" he asked. "Is there any way I can help you?"

He already knew the answer, but carefully kept up his mask of innocence.

Greagoir shoved the letter at him. Greagoir shoved the letter at him. "Her Grace wants a Healer sent to Denerim. She's setting up a clinic for the poor. If it's a success, she might want more Healers, too." He snorted, "She really wants magic to 'serve man,' starting *today!*"

"Why not young Florian?" suggested Irving. "He's quite gifted, and a civilized life in Denerim seems right up his alley. He's never given any Templar the least trouble."

"*Civilized life,*" Greagoir snorted. "Wouldn't we all love *that?* That little ponce." He wiped his face. "'Scuse me. She – Her Grace – wants us to do more about the Blight, too. Maybe send another batch of mages to Queen Bronwyn, whom she reminds me is *'dear to Our Lady.'* She also said if I've got excess Templars who want to help the Wardens, I should let them go."

That was promising. Whatever his views on the Maker, the Ashes of Andraste had proved a wonder, and Irving had a very high opinion of Ferelden's young Queen.

"Well..." Irving tugged on his beard and ventured, "These are all good things, are they not? Helping the sick, helping the fight against the darkspawn... They're good things, and not beyond our powers."

"No," Greagoir snarled. His fist pounded the desk, making the bowl of broth slop over. "'S'not beyond our powers to send young people to their deaths, *while we sit back drinking our bloody brandy!*"

Technically, it was Greagoir's brandy. Irving was offered a drink when Greagoir was in a good mood. Irving understood what Greagoir meant to say, however. Greagoir was feeling guilty about Cullen again. That happened from time to time. He had sent young Cullen off with the Wardens, wanting him to spy on the Warden mages, and the young man had ended up bitten in two by a dragon. Bronwyn had sent Greagoir the kindest letter, extolling Cullen's virtues, but Greagoir still felt the boy's death as a great reproach to himself personally: a judgment on him for playing games and fancying himself *subtle*.

"We don't have to sit back. No one says we have have march all the way to the darkspawn," Irving pointed out. "You could ride a horse, couldn't you? I, of course, would find a wagon more agreeable."

"We can't leave the Circle." There was a curious gleam in

Greagoir's eye. Irving knew he was winning.

"Of course we can," he said briskly. "Just as we did when we left to attend the conclave. I thought you were grooming Ser Rhodry as your successor. A little *stern*," Irving lied, thinking Rhodry quite a reasonable fellow, actually, but wanting to make Greagoir think he'd be leaving the Circle in the hands of a terrible taskmaster, "but I'm sure he would grow into the position. And Sweeney could manage the mages..."

"He's half blind!"

"...with the help of Leorah..." Irving smiled ruefully. "Perhaps death-defying adventures are not only for the young. The two of us have been defying death for some years now."

As the Grey Wardens of Thedas made their way south or west, they experienced their share of hindrances and hazards. Daring bandits raided baggage trains. The boldest of them struck at the First Warden's own guard one night, when they camped on the Silent Plains under the brilliant stars. The bandits were driven off, for the most part. Those bandits who were caught were gruesomely executed, and their heads displayed along the Imperial Highway, with the placard "Enemy of the Grey Wardens" tacked to the stakes. The First Warden considered conscripting them, but decided that making an example was more useful at the moment. Those interfering with Wardens in the performance of their duty would pay the price.

The Felicisima Armada attacked the Rivainni Wardens at

sea. The pirates were soundly trounced, but the Rivainnis still had to put in at Wycome for repairs. The Rivainni Warden-Commander set his jaw with forced patience, but privately swore revenge on the Armada. They had ruled these seas too long. Anyone who hindered or delayed Wardens in their duty ought to face the harshest penalties. He could not spare the time now, but he suspected that his friends in Antiva would be glad to join him in sacking Llomeryn, the pirates' stronghold. Perhaps some of the Marchers would join in. It should be profitable, and very, very satisfying.

The Nevarran Wardens, naturally, were the first to arrive in Cumberland. They marched quickly toward the Orlesian border, fast-moving scouts on horseback in the lead. All along the way they met weary refugees, pleading for help. From them, they learned what was happening to the west. Val Chevin, the closest of all cities to Val Royeaux, was already bursting with refugees, and the city had closed its gates to more. Newcomers were being directed either north, or east to the Nevarran border, where the guards were letting through those who had the coin to bribe them. For those too poor to pay, a sprawling, disorganized refugee camp had sprung up near the Imperial Highway, just at the border crossing by the River Chevin. It was a vile place, where savagery ruled; where rape and robbery were commonplace; and it grew larger every day. Some Chantry people had arrived there: a Revered Mother named Dorothea and a few Templars and priests. They were trying to put the place in order, but it was a desperate affair.

The darkspawn had not ventured further north than a few miles from Val Royeaux. The crossroads at Belle Fourche were still open, as far as anyone knew. It could be that the horde was moving south, or southwest, toward the rich city of Val Foret. No one was sure of anything, except that they wanted to get as far away as possible.

On the seventh of Drakonis, news finally reached Qunandar of the Orlesian collapse. It had traveled quickly by the usual agents, one of whom had happened to discover that the Rivainni Grey Wardens were going south to fight the Blight. A few of the Wardens had visited a tavern and spread the news. The agent had boldly questioned the men, and then had galloped to Kont-arr and found a ship. The Grey Wardens had ever been a thorn in the side of the Qunari in Rivain. While the Qunari had come to Thedas long after the last of the fabled "Blights," the order of Grey Wardens remained in their wake; a useless relic, as far as the Qunari could determine. Qunari had occasionally captured Grey Wardens, but found them remarkably difficult to indoctrinate. Nor did they respond normally to the use of qamek to subdue them.

It did not take long for the Arishok, the Arigena, and the Ariqun to meet in council, discuss the matter and agree on a plan. The Arishok had sent a party of Beresaad to Ferelden some months ago to discover the answer to the question: "*What is the Blight?*" but had not heard from the Sten in command. Very likely the soldiers of the Beresaad

were dead, which might be a kind of answer to the question they were sent to investigate.

The Qunari cared little about the history of Thedas prior to their arrival from the north. Much of it consisted of the insignificant accounts of pointless battles amongst even more pointless robber lords. However, the Blights loomed large, and while much of the lore of the darkspawn was obviously superstitious rubbish, there did appear to be a core of truth somewhere amidst the myths.

If the city of the strongest of the bas had been sacked by the creatures, perhaps it was time for the people of the Qun to take a hand in restoring order. An expeditionary force was loaded into a dreadnought and sent south, with orders to land on the coast of the Waking Sea and discover if Orlais was ripe for conversion. The Qunari had previously targeted the minor territory of Ferelden for conquest, to give them a strategic foothold in the south, but this new opportunity was far more promising.

Lanaya took the news that they were needed in the west very well. She was strong in her conviction that they owed the Grey Wardens their loyalty. Her clan, at least, would support Merrill in her efforts to rally the Dalish.

Four hundred odd Dalish were on the march, moving swiftly toward the Frostback passes. Some Fereldans knew that the Dalish were involved in the war against the darkspawn, and thus made allowances for the large number of aravels

openly journeying on Fereldan roads. Others were frightened and angered at the sight of so many armed elves. Farmers and their families hid in their houses. Random arrows flickered through the trees. Insults were shouted in the villages the Dalish could not avoid without time-wasting detours.

Hostile guardsmen at a nobleman's manor challenged them one day, hands lingering on their sword hilts.

"Heard you knife-ears were given land of your own. Why don't you stay on it?" one gibed.

The Dalish warriors bristled, but Merrill gazed on the men in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Queen Bronwyn has called us to fight the darkspawn," she told them in her sweet, lilting voice. "You don't think we should *disobey* her, do you?"

The guards looked at each other, and then backed away.

"Er, no... 'course not. On your way, then."

The elves passed, crowding the guards off the road. Merrill called to the disgruntled men over her shoulder.

"You should come with us. Bronwyn's terribly nice. We'll have lots of fun at the war!"

They needed to move fast, but not so fast that they were too tired to fight. Riordan had moved his people up the Imperial Highway without delay, but various problems had arisen. People began asking questions when they saw the entire complement of the Jader Grey Wardens marching through the countryside. There were one hundred and fifteen of them,

after all, along with their supply wagons. It was slow-going through the hills around Halamshiral. It was not surprising that the city guards of Halamshiral should be concerned, when they admitted such a large force.

And it would be wrong to lie. When taxed by the captain of the guard, Riordan told the man the truth: the darkspawn had risen and attacked Val Royeaux. The Archdemon had led them. The Blight was in Orlais. The man immediately took Riordan to speak to the Vicomte de Brangelome, who was steward in the absence of Duke Enguerrand. A council was called, and Riordan felt obligated to stay and tell the leaders of the province everything he knew, realizing that he might well be leaving panic in his wake.

The Vicomte begged him to stay, or to at least leave him a few Wardens. Riordan considered it, but refused. They would need every Warden to combat the horde he had seen in the Fade. Instead, he conscripted all the fit-looking criminals in the city dungeons. Perhaps he could find a use for them.

It rained on the journey, not improving their spirits. Riordan's dreams were confused. Perhaps the Archdemon was blocking clearer visions, having lifted the veil enough to shock and awe them.

They reached Lydes just as the first refugees from Val Royeaux arrived there. This also slowed them down considerably, for they needed to talk to them and find out more of what actually had happened. The city was overcrowded and chaotic, trying absorb too many penniless people at once.

Many of the people were too overwhelmed by the horrors they had experienced to give a clear story. It had been the middle of the night; they had been roused by a living, stinking nightmare that was all too real. Some had lost wives, children, parents in their flight; families had been torn apart by the rush of maddened, hysterical crowds; survivors had seen loved ones slip under the water when they grew too exhausted to keep clinging to the side of a boat. Many had had no time even to gather the barest necessities. Some were barefoot; their feet torn and scabby. Some who had fled half-naked had perished of exposure on the ships, and then been tipped into the sea. So many corpses had attracted huge numbers of sharks, which followed the rag-tag fleet, feeding off death in a blood frenzy.

There were a number of children who could not be matched to an adult, and the Lydes Chantry did not feel equipped to take in any but the infants who would die immediately without care. That left children as young as four or five out on the streets to fend for themselves. Some were quickly snapped up by brothel-keepers; some had banded together in feral packs on the half-day's ghastly march from the Port of Lydes. Small bodies were found every day in filthy alleys, dead of hunger, of cold, of abuse, of heartbreak.

Fiona and some other elven Wardens went to the Alienage, to talk to the handful of elven refugees. To some extent, the elves who had actually survived – and they were not many – were better off than the humans. There was a defined com-

munity they could go to. The elves of the Lydes Alienage were poor, of course, but they were willing to share what they had. The surviving elves all had a roof over their heads.

"They really don't know what happened around the Palace or the Cathedral," Fiona told Riordan later. "The survivors were almost all servants from noble houses fairly close to the docks. Anyone farther away could not outrun the darkspawn, or they fled by the north or east gates."

She did not bother to repeat some of the horror stories, but they had roused furious indignation in the Alienage. Two elven girls had been pulled to what they thought was safety on a boat, and then had been gang-raped by the men on board for the entire two days it took to cross the Waking Sea. Old men and women had given sailors everything they owned, and had been thrown to the sharks afterwards. Babies had been killed for making too much noise. Taken by themselves, no one event was all that unusual. In the aggregate, it was an ugly reminder of how little humans valued elven lives.

"If it looks like the darkspawn are coming east, the elves are talking about moving out *en masse* and heading for the Fereldan border. Words been trickling in about the new Dalish homeland, and that the Fereldan queen has elven advisors. The elves know that no Orlesian soldier will die for an elf, and the elves have so little that it would not be wrench to leave what they have behind."

"Did you see any candidates for the Joining?"

"One or two, but the elves see little point in fighting for

Orlais, either. They could be conscripted, but they very likely would run away."

"Then we don't need them. I found some prospects among the refugees. Thugs, mostly, but with the look of good fighters." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. "They would march on Val Royeaux – even face the darkspawn – for the privilege of picking through the rubble."

Fiona was disgusted, but knew they must be practical. "Then we should take what we can get."

There were only a dozen of them, and not all would live, but Riordan gave them a brief talk and some equipment, just as he had the seven from Halamshiral. There was no time for a Joining. Perhaps they would do that in Verchiel...

Which turned out to be impossible, since the gates of Verchiel were shut against them. Smoke hung over the city in an ominous haze. At a distance, Riordan had at first feared the darkspawn had already reached it, but this was human violence. Verchiel had fallen to Olivier, the Sieur de Flambard, and his soldiers, who were determined to hold it against all threats. Those threats, in the opinion of de Flambard, included Grey Wardens. He and Riordan had a heated, shouted conference, with Riordan outside the gate and de Flambard standing well protected above the gatehouse. A band of hostile archers took aim at the Wardens below, ready to shoot on order.

"We want no Grey Wardens in Verchiel!" declared the angry nobleman. "Wardens attract the Archdemon! We



saw it at the camp on the River Orne!"

"On the River Orne? Where is the Imperial Army?" Riordan shouted back, desperate for news. Possibly the man was right: it could have happened that the Archdemon, sensing a Warden, might have followed him.

"There is no Imperial Army! Not anymore!"

"What *happened*?" Riordan asked, his heart in his boots. This was a disaster.

"Much of what is left of the army is within these walls! A Warden brought the news of the fall of Val Royeaux to the Imperial Army as we were camped by the River Orne. Then he rode on to Montsimmard. That very night, the Archdemon swooped down upon us and destroyed the camp with fire. The Marquis, his brother, and his entire staff were roasted alive. A quarter of the army was killed. We spent the next few days picking up the pieces. Many deserted. The Wardens from Montsimmard arrived and tried to make us follow them to Val Royeaux. It is madness. Some followed them, but others — and the wounded — came here under my command. There were Wardens at Val Royeaux, too. I'm no fool. I've heard that Wardens can sense darkspawn. It's clear to me that *they can sense you, too*. So get out of here. Go chase the Archdemon, but don't lure it back here, or I'll kill you all. I have people to protect."

Riordan studied the man. It was inevitable that every so often someone — more keenly perceptive than most — would divine some of the Warden secrets. A pity that this



man was so against them, for he seemed intelligent and brave. If he were not up on a wall, surrounded by archers, Riordan would have conscripted him on the spot.

"And what will you do," he demanded, "if the horde marches on Verchiel?"

Olivier de Flambarde glared down at him. "Then we will hold this city. We are provisioning ourselves for a siege. We have ballista that can be aimed at the sky. We keep watch. If the darkspawn try to storm the walls, we have boiling oil to pour down on them. If they try to burrow up through the ground, we will poison them in their tunnels like rabbits. We don't *need* Wardens. Now go."

"You don't know everything," Riordan said, trying to reason with him. "Believe me, you *do* need Wardens. Only a Warden can slay an Archdemon —"

"You have until I count three to start leaving," replied de Flambarde. "And then I will order my archers to shoot. One... two..."

"Wardens! Move out!"

They retreated, feeling terribly exposed. A few raunchy insults followed them. Some of the Wardens swore bitterly, and others muttered dark threats.

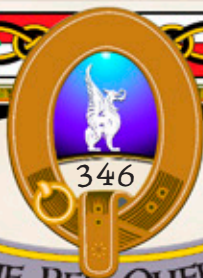
"— *When the darkspawn come, I say we let them have this pesthole!*"

"— *He won't be so haughty when he's rotting from the Taint.*"

Fiona huffed sharply at that. Riordan sighed, and gave her a look of mild reproof.

"Well, he won't be," she muttered.

"Possibly not, but how many innocents will die to satisfy



THE RED QUEEN

his pride?"

"Riordan?" asked an archer. "Where do we go now? Montsimnard?"

That was a question. He had no idea how to answer the woman. It was in the Maker's hands.

"We'll go back to that stream we saw earlier in the day," he decided. "There is good water there. We will hold the Joining. Then I must think."

They went deep enough into the forest not to be visible to anyone in Verchiel, even on the highest towers. They set up a carefully well organized, defensible camp, talking volubly. Disputes broke out. The oldtimers had their hands full keeping the recruits on task. Riordan sat on his folding canvas stool, chin on his fist, trying to sort out what to do in the face of this very bad situation. Fiona busily mixed the Joining compound. The ritual had special meaning, in these desperate circumstances. Twelve out of the nineteen recruits lived, which was reasonably successful. Riordan hoped it was a sign.

After something to eat, they felt better. It was no longer so cold at night, so the Wardens did not complain much when Riordan made them put out the fires after supper. The surviving recruits were laid on blankets in a tent to sleep off the shock of the Joining. The dead were taken deeper into the forest and left for the wolves: an old-fashioned country alternative to burning. A large pyre would be unwise.

"There is no reason to make ourselves noticed," he said quietly. "We must rest. Alain, organize a good watch. Let



THE RED QUEEN

nothing slip past. We will talk in the morning."

He was stalling, he acknowledged to himself. He was stalling because he had no idea what to do.

His dreams were not much help, unless one imagined that seeing Gerod Caron's rotting head on a stake was a help. The man was a Senior Warden of Montsimnard, and Riordan knew him well. The Fade vision was too blurred and vague to give Riordan a hint as to where the chuckling darkspawn were. Somewhere, some Wardens had met the darkspawn, and it had not gone well.

Still, sleep worked its old magic, as it always did. By dawn, he was able to come up with something resembling a plan.

"We will not go to Montsimnard," he told them. "We are going northwest, toward the army's last camp at the River Orne. We will scout to determine if it was indeed a dragon that attacked the army. We will attempt to round up any stragglers..." He paused. "If they are human, they may be in need of the Joining. If they are darkspawn... we fight. We will continue northwest to Val Foret, where perhaps we can learn more."

It all seemed reasonable, and there were nods. Riordan was not yet done.

"Fabrice, Clovis, Minjonet — you are going back to the border."

"To Jader?" asked Clovis, a sturdy sword and shield man.

"No," Riordan said firmly. "Beyond the border. Go wherever you need to go to find the Fereldan Wardens. Seek out Bronwyn. Tell her what we have discovered so far. Tell her where we have gone. Tell her to recruit as many as

she can. Ask her to show more mercy than she has been shown, and to come to us. The time for foolish secrecy is over. We are all Wardens."



BETHANY HAWKE, MAGE

CHAPTER 10



MAGICAL
CREATURES

LOGHAIN WAS CERTAINLY HAPPY TO SEE HER. Bronwyn backed away from that searing kiss, somewhat wide-eyed. Very

happy to see her. He was looking at her, just looking at her as if she were Andraste herself – no, that sounded wrong – as if she were the greatest woman of the world, and had given him a gift he had longed for his whole life long.

"You look well," he said, and then paused. "No... that's not what I meant to say. You look beautiful. How do you feel?"

"I feel... fine," she answered, a little flustered. "And you?"

He shot her a keen look, nodding here and there at the cheering soldiers, appearing not to see the cheering Jade-rians. He was quite oblivious to the fact – unlike Bronwyn – that the passionate kiss he had so publicly bestowed on his queen had raised him very much in his new subjects' esteem. From a barbarian bogeyman, he had become a hero of romance. People loved romance. And Loghain was a very impressive figure after all... very dashing, whether he cared to acknowledge it or not. In fact, in his iconic Orlesian

armor, captured at his victory at the River Dane, he looked a far more credible chevalier than most chevaliers. The people of Jader had not expected that, and were very pleased.

Their dogs were happy, too; greeting one another in proper doggy fashion, tails wagging in excited blurs. The crowds chuckled, amused and kind. Loghain was a hero of romance... with a faithful hound. Scout was happy to see him, too, and barked cheerfully.

"Come inside," said Bronwyn, her heart somewhat warmed to her husband... perhaps because his was so obviously warmed toward her. "Come inside and see our new palace. It's quite amazing."

"What are all these Orlesians doing here?" he asked, his nostrils flared as at a foul odor.

"They're your new subjects. They live here," she said patiently. "That is the steward, Ser Manfred, and that is the seneschal, Gilbert. Over there are the minor nobles and landholders. They know all about the place and they've done homage to me. They're very useful."

"You've accepted the homage of Orlesian noblemen?" Despite his good mood, he sounded just the least bit testy.

"Noblemen of *Jader*, yes. They're not Orlesian anymore. They're Fereldans. And you should accept their homage, too." She looked over her shoulder, smiling and waving to the crowd. "Loghain, give them a wave. They're quite happy to get out from under the Empress."

He scowled ferociously, but turned and put up a gaunt-

leted hand in acknowledgement. His scowl deepened at the happy cheers and the fluttering red banners.

"What's all that about?" he asked.

"No idea. They think I like red, I suppose. I'm a bit tired of it myself, but it would be silly to hurt their feelings." She gave him a look, and with a grunt of acquiescence, he offered her his arm like a gentleman. That pleased the people of Jader, too.

He had never actually been in an Orlesian city, and it made him very nervous and off-balance. He could be attacked at any moment. And he felt countrified and out of his depth, too. To hide his feelings, he assumed his usual stern mask. The place was completely ridiculous. The floor was ridiculous, made of shiny bits of differently colored marble. The walls were ridiculous, covered with paintings of half-dressed layabouts. Even the ceilings were ridiculous, with plaster swirled and stretched and gilded into garlands and leaves. Ridiculous. Fussy and ridiculous. Orlais taxed its merchants and peasants nearly to death, and used the gold to build palaces that were like overgrown trinket boxes.

She showed him the principal rooms of the palace. The one he actually liked was the study, which had a model of the city of Jader on a big table in the middle of the room. The study itself was overdone: an oval room with pilasters of jasper, chalcedony, and greenstone lining the walls and framing the bookshelves, and a fireplace carved with naked girls pretending to read. However, the model of the city was absolutely a delight. It was better than any map.

It was a way to learn this new city in an hour. There were tiny trees and horses on the Voie d'Or — no, the Golden Road from this day forward — and tiny people in Emerald Square, and ships at anchor in the harbor. There was the Alienage, with the huge vhenadah! tree in the middle. Loghain walked around the table, taking it in, not realizing that he was smiling. He pulled up a chair and studied the model. Bronwyn quietly ordered a servant to bring them wine, and sat beside him. She smiled too, at his pale blue eyes, alight with his pleasure in such an object.

"Do you know who made this?" he asked abruptly, after a long, happy silence.

"I don't. I'll ask Gilbert. He knows everything about the Palace. We can but hope the artisan is still alive. Wouldn't it be delightful to have models of all the cities of Ferelden?"

He only grunted, his eyes still on the model. He had never imagined such a thing, but it was better than simply an ornament: it educated and enlightened; it put the place in a kind of perspective. He set down his crystal wine goblet, rather surprised to see that he was holding one. Bronwyn was smiling. He remembered there were other things he wanted to do here.

"I suppose the living quarters here are just as overdecorated."

"Indeed they are. Let me show you."

He followed her out, with a last glance over his shoulder at the enchanting city on the tabletop.

He raised a brow at his own apartments, snorting his

opinion; he raised both brows at the sight of hers, and then brought them crashing down in an access of disapproval.

"Oh, come, Loghain!" Bronwyn laughed. "They're not that bad. The bed is quite comfortable."

"It looks like it would splinter if a man so much as sat on it, much less —"

Bronwyn gestured the servants out, trying not to laugh out loud. "I suppose we could see. I haven't splintered it so far, but it's possible —"

He turned to look at her, his face changing. Bronwyn was silenced at the curious intensity of his expression.

This was inevitable, Bronwyn knew. He was happy to see her. He would want to renew their relationship. Now. She was not sure how to feel about that.

Her childish obsession with him was over and done. Her heart no longer pounded at the sight of him. There were no awkward blushes that she must struggle to master. He was no longer a distant ideal to her, but a real man, with plenty of flaws. Marrying him had seemed the right thing for Ferelden — no, it had been the right thing — but now she felt somewhat trapped. She had not grasped how much she was giving up, by committing herself to this relationship. Thank the Maker they had things in common!

Nor was he repulsive to her physically. He was a generous lover, in that he saw to it that she found their couplings as enjoyable as he. Not a gallant or romantic one, by any means, of course, but satisfying. And she was young, and

her natural drives demanded fulfillment.

They were married. They were husband and wife; King and Queen. They must be lovers in a physical sense. Could they be friends? Bronwyn hoped so, but Loghain was so much older than she, so very used to being in charge, so accustomed to control, so ready to dismiss the opinions of others. He had done a great deal to vex her during the Landsmeet. He had not shown much personal regard for her during their earlier campaign out here in the west, and the memory of the miscarriage still caused her the occasional pang of sorrow. It was all very well to know that their child was safe in the Maker's care, but had things turned out otherwise, Bronwyn even now would be giving Loghain the wonderful news of her pregnancy. The child would have made their family, their friends, their subjects so very happy. The child would have been hers to hold and love; hers to guide and teach; a link with her lost parents and a stake in the future.

A hostage to fortune, too, she granted ruefully, but also a Prince of Ferelden.

It was not to be, but there was always the possibility of another. Bronwyn had struggled with the entire issue of whether or not to use contraception, and had ultimately decided that she could not in honor make use of means to prevent the conception of an heir so badly needed by her country. To do so would be to contravene her duty as Queen of Ferelden. Yes, she could fight the campaign against the darkspawn more effectively without the complication of pregnancy, but

who knew when the Blight would be over? Some had lasted over a hundred years. Was she to put off her life... forever? If she became pregnant, then she would just have to find larger armor when she grew too big to wear what she had.

She moved to help Loghain out of his own armor. For all Bronwyn knew, it had been taken from a kinsman of one of their new subjects. Deftly, she unbuckled and untied; she bent to help him with the poleyns and sabatons. Everything was laid out in proper order on the green silk brocade of her sofa. Then she allowed him to help her slip out of her velvet gown.

As her smallclothes slid away, he took her by the shoulders, looking her in the eye.

His voice husky, he said, "You're a brave and clever girl... and I love you."

Too confused and embarrassed to think of a verbal reply, Bronwyn led him to her bed and made him welcome in their latest home. He was curiously hesitant, and seemed concerned that he would hurt her.

Of course. They told him about the miscarriage.

"I'm quite all right," she assured him, "Entirely healed. I don't want to talk about it."

He still looked like he wanted to talk about it, but she did not, and she succeeded in distracting him from a conversation that would make her sad again.

It was all very nice, very exciting, very pleasurable. They both dozed off afterwards, and Bronwyn buried both dreams and nightmares too far down to be troubled by them.

She was very glad she had had the presence of mind to close the bed curtains, because she awakened to the furtive noises of servants busily working, trying to be quiet as mice: feeding the fire, laying out clothes for dinner, drawing a bath, setting out snacks and wine on the amethyst-topped table.

Yes, the table was covered with a layer of amethyst, smoothed and polished. Bronwyn had seen marble-topped tables in the past, but the tables here were inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ivory, or were topped with solid sheets of semi-precious gemstone: amethyst, topaz, rose quartz, citrine. Yes, it was an obscene display of wealth, but it was here, and it would do no one any good to throw it away and replace it with rough-hewn pine.

She lay back on the silken pillows, and smiled when Loghain opened his eyes, looking about suspiciously. The light coming in through the curtains was a delicate pale green, like the young leaves of a forest in spring. Bronwyn liked it. Red curtains would have made the inside of the bed look like a demonic inferno.

"Our subjects await us, Loghain. Time to put on a show for them."

He sat up, a little disgruntled but quite relaxed.

"Orlesians. They're our enemies, if you don't recall. My policy has always been to ignore them if possible and destroy them if necessary."

Amused, Bronwyn brushed his hair back from his brow and said, "When I make friends of my enemies, do I not destroy them?"

He scoffed loudly at that. Bronwyn laughed.

"Perhaps you'd prefer that I simply waved my hand and shouted, 'Off with their heads!'"

He rubbed his stubbly chin, trying to hide his smile.

"Maybe. Now and then." He added, "I don't mind telling you how impressed I am that you managed to take Jader without striking a blow."

"It was no problem at all," she said archly. "I threatened them with *you*. I told them they could become Fereldan the easy way — " She pointed at herself. " — or the hard way." She slapped his chest lightly.

He looked down at himself, and nodded. "The hard way? Fairly soon, at this rate."

Shaking her head, she slipped through the curtains and shooed the giggling serving maids away. She threw on a dressing gown, and tossed another — larger and outrageously peacock-glorious — to Loghain.

"Maker's Breath! I'm supposed to dress like an Orlesian tart now?"

"A delicious male tart, yes; I suppose so, but only for me." She laughed, and splashed recklessly into the wonderful hot bath.

Loghain scorned the dressing gown — which Bronwyn thought a pity since it was a good color for him — and stalked across the dainty room, proudly naked, which was not bad, either. He slid into the huge tub, making waves, sniffing suspiciously at the scented waters.

"It's sandalwood from Seheron," Bronwyn said. "Surely

that's manly enough for you."

"I know what it bloody well is. It's still a *perfume*."

But his grumpiness was all for show. He was obviously really quite happy, and very nice about scrubbing her out-of-the-way bits.

"Have you met the princesses?" Bronwyn asked.

He snorted. "I was thinking about *you*. And I took time to survey the Rock. No time for playing games with Orlesian snakelings."

"They're not so bad. Very young, and kept locked up and very ignorant of anything practical."

"Hmph. Sounds sensible to me. Let's keep them that way. Locked up and ignorant."

Bronwyn rolled her eyes. "*Of course* I've ordered a strict watch over them. The woman who guarded them for the Empress was a nasty tyrant who tried to kill them rather than let them fall into my hands. Like the people of Jader, the girls seem quite happy at the change. They could be useful, too. We'll want to appoint a Fereldan to rule Jader... as an arl, I thought. If one of the princesses married him, it would go down well with the locals. The youngest, I think."

He scoffed at that, too, reflexively, but considered her words. Loghain's opinion of Bronwyn, always high, had soared, and he was willing to grant that she seemed to have the knack of managing these strange people. Was she planning for Alistair to be Arl of Jader? It might do. It might also cause a great deal of trouble, since Loghain disliked mixing the blood of Kordilius Drakon into the

Fereldan nobility. Their children might well have dangerous ideas. He was too pleased with Bronwyn to shoot down the idea on the spot, and instead decided to think it over.

First, however, he had to demonstrate 'the hard way' to his young queen. She seemed to like it very much, though a great deal of soapy water sloshed onto the shining floor.

Loghain was not the only man glad to see his lover again. Tara was enchanted with the charming little nest Zevran had made for them in one of the servant's rooms connected to the family apartments. It held a deep, downy sleigh bed, painted with flowers and... dragons... of all things, and was draped with rose satin that Zevran had appropriated from the palace linen chests. It had a little arched window and a door that locked. He had claimed a number of other trifles as well: an inlaid chest, bronze lamps in the form of dancing girls, a set of blue goblets, a little tinder box of solid gold.

Her gorgeous, mysterious mirror fitted in just perfectly. "But what is it?" Zevran asked, coming up for air. "Mind you, I like the way you've positioned it... very stimulating, *cara mia*."

Tara bounced up and grinned naughtily in the eluvian. Then she gave it a wave. Zevran glanced at it, wrinkling his brow in uneasy concern.

"Don't worry! I don't think they can see us."

"Who?"

"The ancient elves of Arlathan," Tara declared grandly.

"That's an eluvian. According to my readings, the elves used them to communicate with each other, and possibly to travel from place to place. The magisters could manage the communication part only. It was stored in the Aeonar and covered with dust, so I don't think the Chantry researchers had any luck with it."

"There was no such 'eluvian' at the Circle?"

"No... never saw one before, but I read about them in the library there. There was an old book on elven artifacts that nobody but me cared about." She gazed deep into the silvery depths of the looking-glass, past the dim reflections of the two comely naked elves. "I'm betting serious money that there's something very important for us to learn here. I have the strangest feeling about it."

Zevran lay back at his ease, hands behind his head. "Will you show it to Anders and Morrigan, then?"

She thought about that. "No. Not yet. Maybe not ever. This is elven magic. This is for *us*. I like Morrigan, but she'd grab it for herself if she thought it was important. I like Anders, too, for that matter, but no. This is for the elves. Maker knows we have little enough of our own. Siofranni's gone to summon the Dalish. I want to show this to Merrill and Lanaya and get their opinion first. I've told all the rest of my people not to say anything about this. For all anybody knows, it's just a really fancy mirror that I took for my share of the loot. Let's keep it that way."



Bronwyn and Loghain held Court the following day, up on the grand dais, enthroned in splendor. Many came, seeking audience. The nobles of Jader uneasily paid homage to Loghain, who uneasily accepted it. Certain facets of Orlesian life were manifestly offensive to the new Fereldan monarchs: no masks were to be worn. It was made clear that the fashion for masks had passed, and that anyone wearing one would not only not be permitted into the royal presence; they were likely to be mocked as hopelessly uncouth. La Voie d'Or had become the Golden Road overnight. Jader boasted an Emerald Square and an Emerald Palace. Other familiar names were vanishing. Innkeepers kept sign-painters busy with new names for old taverns. Those sign-painters used quite a bit of red paint. Some even depicted large and ferocious dogs.

Among the Orlesians presented to Loghain was Ser Berthold de Guesclin, formerly in command of Roc du Chevalier. It was clear to see that the Orlesians were far more comfortable with Bronwyn than with Loghain himself, though that was no more than Loghain had expected. De Guesclin seemed quite impressed by Bronwyn, and was eager to go west and fight the Blight. What surprised Loghain was how anxious the Orlesians were for leadership – even his own.

Not all of them. The steward had tales to tell of the independent-minded lordlings who had decamped to their keeps, clearly hoping to wait out the war. Some had unwisely left wives and children in the city; these would

be kept in comfortable captivity as hostages. Others had been sent stiffly worded message, demanding their presence before King Loghain and Queen Bronwyn, no later than the twelfth of Drakonis. If they failed in their duty, their lands and titles would be forfeit.

Bronwyn smirked, thinking about it. "That should bring them."

"You want more armed Orlesians?" Loghain muttered under his breath.

"Yes, I do," Bronwyn insisted. "It's their bloody country, and they can bloody well defend it. Especially the noblemen. If they can't ride out and do their duty, I swear I'll dispossess the lot of them and put them on a boat to Par Vollen and let the Qunari decide what they're fit for!"

That got a chuckle out of him. Actually, it was not a bad idea... for some of the useless Fereldan nobles, either.

After the endless ceremony, they adjourned to the council chamber. The councilors numbered only eight at first: Bronwyn and Loghain, Arls Wulffe and Bryland, Ser Blayne Faraday, Alistair, Cauthrien and also Emrys Stronnar, because all the nobles knew him or his capable uncle, and Alistair had come to rely on him quite a bit. The others, including the new Jaderian subjects, were left to cool their heels in antechambers while the big decisions were made.

"Are we going to keep Jader?" Corbus piped up. "It's rather nice, isn't it?" He liked his room quite a bit, and Killer had his own velvet cushion. He wished Lothar were here to see it all.

There was some mild laughter about the room. Loghain told the boy. "We are definitely keeping Jader. We needed a good city on our western border. And we're keeping Solidor and the Rock, too!" He pointed to the large map on the wall, admiring how the border was far neater and more defensible now. "Jader is ours for good, lad. We'll need to organize it as a proper holding. Bronwyn —" he nodded to his queen — "thinks it should be an arling."

Wulffe stroked his beard. "It's a big enough territory for that. Six Fereldan arlings instead of five... three in the north and three in the south. One teyrnir in the north and one in the south. Balances things off, I suppose. And Jader's a big city. That's a fine demesne. We'd better put someone there whose loyalty can't be questioned or bought. Someone the fancy lot here can respect, too."

Emrys was trying to catch Alistair's eye. Alistair was scrupulously studying his boots. Cauthrien watched them both, rather interested.

"We'll have some new bannorns to share out, too," Bronwyn said. "Dispossessing lords who've sworn homage would be dishonorable. Quite a few, however, have not made an appearance. They were either with the army, like the Marquis, or they've gone to ground. I'm willing to stretch a point if a wife or an heir shows up to act as proxy, but if some representative doesn't present himself — or herself — in timely fashion, the lands are forfeit. It's important to sprinkle in a lot of loyal Fereldans to bind

Jader to the kingdom." She turned to Cauthrien. "When we draw the borders, I think that Haven should be on the south end of the arling."

Cauthrien could see the sense in that. Now and then, she thought about going to see the place. It was theoretically hers, and she was very curious about it. She had not had a home of her own since Loghain had plucked her out of the the life of a farmer's daughter in the Bannorn. Not that she regretted that for an instant, but she had reached a point in her life when the idea of settling down in a place she could call hers was not unpleasant.

Ser Blayne spoke up for his friend. "You couldn't ask for a more faithful man than Norrel Haglin."

Bronwyn's smile became a trifle fixed, but she said nothing. It would suit her if the man stayed on the border for the rest of his life. Loghain agreed with the knight, of course.

"He won't be forgotten," he agreed. "Nor will you. That steward fellow... Ser Manfred... found me a good map of the area, showing all the holdings. After the twelfth, we'll start dividing the spoils."

"And then what?" Wulffe said. He peered at Bronwyn, trying to read her intentions. "Are we going to try for more, or hold what we have?"

"I don't believe..." Loghain said slowly. "I don't believe that grabbing more territory is necessarily a wise move for Ferelden. Even the addition of Jader will alter our national character in some ways. We don't want to water

down our culture with too much Orlais. Ferelden is still somewhat depopulated from the eighty years of Occupation. We've got a good border now, and a fine, rich city. If we're greedy, we're likely to overextend ourselves, and leave an opening for other enemies."

"I agree that we should make no more territorial claims," Bronwyn put in, her voice clear and firm. "However, we still have a Blight to contend with. The current alliance of men, elves and dwarves must go west and take the field against the darkspawn."

"The Orlesians won't like that," Wulffe pointed out.

"I am indifferent to their opinion," Bronwyn said coldly. "There has been too much selfish parochialism. Yes, it is not hard to rejoice at the sight of a mighty enemy humbled, but beyond that, the fall of a city such as Val Royeaux puts all Thedas in very great danger."

Loghain frowned, waiting to hear her out.

Corbus did not understand, and said so. "Why is that, Bronwyn?"

"Because," Bronwyn explained, sorry to tell the boy the ugly truth. "When the horde sacked the city, it abducted many women and girls. Those unfortunates will be used to breed thousands and thousands more darkspawn: will likely take over month or so – maybe two – but eventually, the horde will increase many times beyond its present size – and it is already huge. Eventually, the horde will pick the area around Val Royeaux clean, and move on to the next city, and the next, ever abducting more victims and swell-

ing its ranks. The longer we wait, the greater the odds against us when the horde turns our way. And it will."

Loghain loathed the idea of fighting to save Orlesians, but the argument was convincing. Better to fight the darkspawn in Orlais than to fight even more darkspawn in Ferelden. Bronwyn was making sound strategic sense.

"It sounds like you'll need more Wardens," Ser Blayne said.

"Absolutely," Bronwyn agreed. "Tomorrow I shall put out a call for them. When the Dalish and dwarves arrives, I shall do likewise. We definitely need more Wardens. Lots more. I might even poach more mages. When we go west, we'll likely be entering areas vilely Tainted, where only Wardens and dwarves can travel in safety. In the meantime, I'll need what's left of Orlais to remain more or less at peace, until it can sort itself out."

"Until we can sort it out," grunted Loghain.

"Yes, very likely we'll have to do that, too. We don't want such a state of anarchy on our border that mobs of refugees start pouring over."

Emrys spoke for the first time. "Perhaps we should think about what we want Orlais to be when all this is past."

Ser Blayne snorted. "Perhaps we should think about whether we want an Orlais at all!"

Emrys did not roll his eyes, but his mouth tightened. "Some sort of diminished Orlais, I think, would be a very good idea. Or maybe a few small buffer states. An East Orlais, a South Orlais... something of the sort. As Bronwyn

so justly says, we don't want to deal with the overflow from a land in anarchy. Furthermore, such a place would be ripe for conquest. We may not want more Orlesian territory, but others might. Would we really want Nevarra, ally or not – swollen with land and people, immensely more powerful – on our western doorstep?"

"Or the Qunari, eager to make order of disorder?" At the questioning looks around the table, Bronwyn shrugged. "My companion Sten was sent here as part of a scouting party to discover more about the Blight, since the Qunari arrived long after the last one."

"To discover more than that," said Loghain. Bronwyn was right to be suspicious of the Qunari. As for young Emrys... he looked at the lad with new respect. Very sensible young man. Good analysis of the situation. Perhaps the precedent of giving Wardens some territory should be followed here. If they made Alistair the arl, he would need a good bann he could rely on.

After finishing her meeting with the inner circle of Fereldans and the outer circle of Jaderians, Bronwyn still needed to talk to her Wardens about their plans. They gathered in a luxurious salon, and draped themselves over the furniture, eating and drinking, as usual. Leliana and Silas whispered together, their faces serious. Tara and Zevran held hands. It was very sweet. Fenris was watching Bronwyn herself, his huge green eyes intent. Occasionally

she found the intensity of his gaze a bit disturbing, but today she was glad to have everyone's full attention.

"First of all," she said, "I want to thank everyone for their brilliant service. The campaign to take Jader and the Frostback fortresses has been a tremendous success, won with a minimal loss of life. I wish all wars could be fought so. Everyone in the Warden party will be paid a bonus of twenty sovereigns tomorrow."

This was greeted with great enthusiasm. Maeve was eager to go shopping in the Grand Bazaar. Catriona had promised to go with her, but planned to send all of her bonus home to her brother, along with much of the rest of her pay. Maker knew he needed it. Twenty sovereigns would not only pay his rent for the year: it would feed and clothe him and the children very well indeed. She'd made friends with the official courier, who had agreed to carry "Wardens' correspondence" in his post-bag.

"So what do we do now?" asked Sigrun. "Are we going to explore the Deep Roads again?"

Toliver grinned, "Or will I have time to make a complete catalog of Jader taverns?"

"Will you watch the progress of the Blight from your newly-won towers?" Sten asked, his disapproval manifest, "or do you intend to pursue this campaign?"

"Well, I think it's time the rest of the Wardens stepped up and did something," Carver declared, feeling defensive. "If you'd seen everything the Nevarran Wardens have! There

are hundreds of them, too. And what about all those Wardens in Montsimmard? Why is it always *our* problem?"

Morrigan sneered at him. "If the darkspawn decide to march in this direction, it *will* be 'our' problem, whether you like it or not. I say we must continue to fight the darkspawn, and vigorously, too."

They were restless; Bronwyn knew they had too little to do. She must nip this debate in the bud.

"Morrigan is absolutely right," she said. The witch preened smugly.

Bronwyn only smiled, and went on: "We shall march west soon. I agree that the darkspawn remain a great danger. Greater than ever, perhaps, since their number will greatly increase very soon. I agree that the other Wardens must do their part, Carver, but we simply don't know where they are. Presumably they saw what we saw, but since they have done so little up to now, I can't say that I trust them to do the right thing. And even if they *do* the right thing, I can't say that I trust them to do it well."

She popped a stuffed date into her mouth and waved dismissively at the thought of other Wardens. "When they come, they come. Meanwhile, we've got to do some serious recruiting before we leave. When you're out and about, look for likely recruits in the city. Loghain brought us some of Master Wade's dragon-hunting spears. We'll practice with them so you all know how they work. Jowan, I want you and Carver to stand up now and tell us everything the

Nevarran Wardens told you about dragon hunting. Yes, I know you've told quite a bit to various people, but everyone needs to hear everything. We may need more equipment, and there are good smiths here in Jader."

Carver was always eager to make himself heard, and discoursed for some time, with Jowan adding bits here and there. Some dragonhunters had dug pit traps; other used triple-strand spider silk nets. Everyone used heavy barbed spears and poison. The dragonhunters had carried long, light shields of silverite to deflect blasts of flame. Some times they had assistants whose only job was to hold and position the shields over the hunters, while they themselves wore protective clothing. The hunters had also often made use of the terrain, finding high places where they could shoot down at a dragon, or even – in the most daring cases – leap down on a flying dragon's back.

"Jump down on a flying dragon?" Petra asked, astonished. "That's the craziest, stupidest thing I've ever heard!"

"I'd do it," Brosca declared, eyes alight. "It sounds like fun. The Boss rode a dragon that time –"

"Exactly!" Carver said, boiling over with enthusiasm. "That's exactly what some of the Pentaghasts did. Some of them still train in an art they call 'tumbling,' which is learning to jump and roll and leap."

"I've seen professional tumblers," Leliana put in. "They are very diverting. They turn flips in the air and make human pyramids – and perform all sorts of tricks. Some

minstrels have learned the skill. I had not thought of applying some their arts to fighting, but I can see situations where those tricks would be useful."

"Crows are taught some tumbling," Zevran agreed.

"Anyway," Jowan cut in, "Back to dragonhunting... The dragonhunters would also use bait. Dragons are attracted to blood. They really like human blood, and especially –" he cleared his throat. " – the moon blood of a young woman. Sometimes the dragonhunters even brought a young woman who was having her courses with them. It would make the dragons excited and reckless. They also killed drakes, and... er... made use of the drake's... er... natural juices... to attract the dragon."

Raucous laughter greeted that suggestion.

"Victims of luuuurrrrve!" shouted Oghren. "That's terrific! Wonder if it would work on the Archdemon? She probably hasn't had any in... what? About twelve ages!"

The meeting swiftly descended into bawdy chaos. Bronwyn laughed, too, remembering the drakes at Haven. They could talk more about this in the coming days.

The Qunari's shout cut above the noise. "*Parshaara!* How soon do we march?" Sten asked, pressing the matter. The Wardens slowly subsided.

"That depends somewhat upon our allies," Bronwyn said. "I would prefer it was sooner rather than later. Danith, how quickly do you think the Dalish can be here?"

"I am not sure. Still, I am certain that Lanaya will come.

Merrill, too, and the old Night Elves."

"I'm glad. We'll need good scouts. I've also sent word to the dwarves. The Legion of the Dead has largely regrouped at Orzammar, under their new Paragon."

Brosca lifted her goblet, "Stone protect our Astrid!"

"Aye!" The dwarves rumbled agreement. Then they burst out laughing again.



Bronwyn expected Astrid to arrive within the next day or so. She did not expect the arrival who sailed into Jader Bay, bold as Kordilius Drakon, on his own personal ship, carrying strange cargo indeed.

"It is Duke Prosper de Montfort, Majesty," murmured Gilbert the seneschal, in his most soothing tones. His pronunciation of "Majesty" was very Orlesian: "Majesté." The seneschal added, "He has come to offer his homage... and his support."

"That bloody Orlesian?" Loghain snarled. "That one who showed up at the Landsmeet and had the bloody effrontery to bloody threaten us to our bloody faces?"

"That's the bloody one," Bronwyn agreed, more cheerfully. "Let's see what he has to say, Loghain. It's not like he can play the Empress card anymore." She patted his hand. "If he insults us again, we really can shout, 'Off with his head!'"

Prosper made his appearance, elegant, unruffled, and particularly debonair. Being a high noble of great wealth, he had property near Jader, and hearing that those who wished to keep their estates must pay homage for them,

he was prompt in his duty. He did not commit the offense of appearing with a mask, but instead was dressed in the casual but colorful style appropriate to a gentleman on his travels in an unsettled time. He made his bows, and approached the thrones with well-bred respect.

"Don't tell me," Loghain drawled, "that you ever expected to see us here, and in this situation."

"The wise man," said Prosper, "knows to expect the unexpected, and above all, that when he makes a plan, the Maker might well decide to laugh at him. The Wheel of Fortune has turned, and Your Majesties rule in Jader. The darkspawn have attacked Val Royeaux, and the Empress, my late, lamented cousin, is no more. All reasonable people must agree that ridding ourselves of the darkspawn would be a very good thing. I wish to do my part."

"And what sort of part are you prepared to play, my lord?" Bronwyn asked.

"A not ignoble one, I trust," Prosper answered easily. "I can give you a great deal of information about the situation in Val Royeaux and the composition of the army prior to the attack, as I was there up until the day before. While my principal seat at Montfort, alas, is far beyond my reach, I have lands near Jader and property within the city that will enable me to contribute to your campaign. I have a company of well-trained men-at-arms, whom I will lead into battle under your banner. I know every person of importance within the borders of Orlais. And..." his lips quirked in an odd smile. "I

have a weapon, perhaps... an item that would be of interest to you. I brought it on my ship, at considerable effort. If Your Majesties would condescend to inspect it, I would be honored by your presence at my manor of Galehaut."

Before they would agree to any such thing, the man was interrogated privately and at great length. He could describe at length the scandalous episode of the burning of the Queen of Ferelden and Ferelden's Grand Cleric in effigy; of the lightning storm that struck the Cathedral; and of the subsequent panic and loss of life. He told them frankly that he had heard of the fall of Val Royeaux from the Nevarran Grey Wardens, who had mustered in Cumberland for an overland march south on the Imperial Highway.

"They do mean to cross the border, then?" Loghain asked.

Prosper's light laugh was wry. "I think at this point the border means very little to them. Elements of the royal army will support the Grey Wardens. Obviously, they cannot strip their defenses on the Tevinter border, but many are coming. For that matter, they clearly expect the Wardens of Weisshaupt and even of Tevinter to join them."

"Interesting," Bronwyn said, the words bitter. "An darkspawn attack on Val Royeaux is worthy of their attention."

"It is worthy of everyone's attention," Prosper said, unembarrassed. "I mean no disrespect, Majesty, but how interested would you have been in an attack on the Adamant Fortress?"

Bronwyn regarded him blankly. "I have never heard of such a place, I confess."

"I name it merely as an example. It is an abandoned Grey Warden fortress located in the Western Approach. It seems no more remote to me than Ostagar would to you. Or say, the attack had taken place in Rivain or in the distant Donarks? On the other hand, everyone has heard of Val Royeaux. The Nevarran Grey Wardens seemed... alarmed about the fact that the attack had taken place in a place so populous, but they would not tell me why."

Bronwyn saw no reason to keep it a secret. "The darkspawn use captured women to breed: humans, elves, dwarves. In Val Royeaux they might well have captured hundreds, if not thousands. The process is rapid and ghastly, and results in hundreds of spawn from each abducted woman."

Even Duke Prosper was briefly silenced by that image. "I... see. That is why I was told they had no time to lose."

"Exactly. The horde will grow, and grow, and grow. That is why Blights can last so long. You've given me one very good piece of news already. The Nevarran Wardens are marching toward Val Royeaux. If they could reach the city and destroy the nests, it would slow – even stop – the growth of the horde."

"Then you intend to march against the darkspawn... further into Orlesian territory."

Loghain snorted. "At this point borders mean no more to us than they do to the Nevarrans. Mind you," he said grimly, fixing Prosper with an icy look. "We're not out to conquer Orlais. We have what we want, and we intend to keep it."

"On the other hand," Bronwyn added, "We don't intend to let national prejudices prevent us from fighting the Blight. If we delay and conciliate, the darkspawn win. We will not tolerate opposition to our alliance when it goes west... soon... to face the Archdemon. If people want to fight, they should join with us and not try to hinder us."

"Indeed?" Prosper brightened considerably. "I believe I can be of some assistance to you. If this is clearly an alliance – Fereldan and Orlesian; human, dwarf, and elf – then it will be far more difficult for local warlords and petty powerbrokers to oppose it. To fight the Blight, you have a great deal of potentially hostile territory to cross. I shall do my utmost to dispel – or at least mitigate – that hostility. In such a way, you will have some army left by the time you reach the darkspawn. I shall do my utmost to ensure it. This, I swear." He smiled. "And now, will it please you to come to Galehaut?"

"Oh, Loghain, do let's go. Now I'm curious."

Duke Prosper had considered how they might react to his exhibit, and said, "If you like, bring a retinue of archers. What I am going to show you may seem menacing. It is important that you understand that I am not attempting to assassinate you with it."

Loghain stared hard at the man. "We'll come with you... tomorrow. I confess I'm curious, too."

There seemed little point in not inviting him to dinner. Indeed, their new-sworn lords seemed at greater ease than ever, seeing one of the great nobles of Orlais in their com-

pany. The dinner went quite well, and there were calls for entertainment. Leliana caught Bronwyn's eye.

Bronwyn could imagine her feelings. This was an opportunity to perform in the country where she had been raised. For all her Fereldan birth, Leliana's views and values were essentially Orlesian. She longed to show these nobles that she had made something of herself: a Grey Warden, an accomplished bard and minstrel; a companion to the highest in the land.

"I am certain," Bronwyn said, "that Warden Leliana can oblige us with her skill."

"Indeed!" cried Leliana coming forward, sweeping the floor in her silken gown, her blue eyes sparkling. "Your Majesties, my lords, ladies, and gentlemen! I know just the story."

LELIANA'S TALE OF THE DANCING PRINCESSES

There was once a king who had three beautiful daughters. They slept in one room and when they went to bed, the doors were shut and locked up. However, every morning their shoes were found to be quite worn through as if they had been danced in all night. Nobody could find out how it happened, or where the princesses had been. The king put more locks on their door and set guards on them, but nothing, it seemed, could keep the princesses from wearing out their shoes.

So the king made it known to all the land that if any person could discover the secret and find out where it was that the

princesses danced in the night, he would have the one he liked best to take as his wife, and would be king after his death. But whoever tried and did not succeed, after three days and nights, he would be put to death.

A king's son soon came. He was well entertained, and in the evening was taken to the chamber next to the one where the princesses lay in their three beds. There he was to sit and watch where they went to dance; and, in order that nothing could happen without him hearing it, the door of his chamber was left open. But the king's son soon fell asleep; and when he awoke in the morning he found that the princesses had all been dancing, for the soles of their shoes were full of holes.

The same thing happened the second and third night and so the king ordered his head to be cut off.

After him came several others; but they all had the same luck, and all lost their lives in the same way.

Now it happened that a soldier, who had been wounded in battle and could fight no longer, passed through the country where this king reigned, and as he was traveling through a wood, he fell in with an apostate mage, who asked him where he was going.

"I hardly know where I am going, or what I had better do," said the soldier; 'but I think I would like to find out where it is that the princesses dance, and then in time I might be a king."

"Well," said the mage, 'that is not a very hard task: I've heard the story of how the men all fall asleep. I advise you to take care not to drink any of the wine which one of the princesses will bring to you in the evening; and as soon as she leaves you pretend to be

fast asleep. Follow them and see where they go, but be careful."

"No problem with that," said the soldier. "Stealth is one thing I've learned."

So the soldier he went to the king, and said he was willing to undertake the task.

He was as well received as the others had been, and the king ordered fine royal robes to be given him; and when the evening came he was led to the outer chamber.

Just as he was going to lie down, the eldest of the princesses brought him a cup of wine; but the soldier threw it all away secretly into a potted plant, taking care not to drink a drop. Then he laid himself down on his bed, and in a little while began to snore very loudly as if he was fast asleep.

When the princesses heard this they laughed heartily; and the eldest said, "This fellow too might have done a wiser thing than lose his life in this way!" Then they rose and opened their drawers and boxes, and took out all their fine clothes, and dressed themselves at the mirror, and skipped about as if they were eager to begin dancing.

But the youngest said, "I don't know why it is, but while you are so happy I feel very uneasy; I am sure some mischance will befall us."

"You simpleton," said the eldest, 'you are always afraid; have you forgotten how many kings' sons have already watched in vain? And as for this soldier, even if I had not given him his sleeping draught, he would have slept soundly enough. Hear him snore!"

When they were all ready, they went and looked at the soldier; but he snored on, and did not stir hand or foot: so they thought

they were quite safe.

Then the eldest went up to her own bed and clapped her hands, and the bed sank into the floor and a trap-door flew open. The soldier saw them going down through the trap-door one after another, the eldest leading the way; and thinking he had no time to lose, he jumped up, and followed them, using all his arts of stealth.

However, in the middle of the stairs he trod on the gown of the youngest princess, and she cried out to her sisters, "All is not right; someone took hold of my gown."

The soldier instantly hid behind a pillar.

"You silly creature!" said the eldest, "it is nothing but a nail in the wall."

Down they all went, and at the bottom they found themselves in a most delightful grove of trees; and the leaves were all of silver, and glittered and sparkled beautifully. The soldier wished to take away some token of the place; so he broke off a little branch, and there came a loud noise from the tree. Then the youngest daughter said again, "I am sure all is not right - did not you hear that noise? That never happened before."

But the eldest said, "It is only our secret princes, who are shouting for joy at our approach."

They came to another grove of trees, where all the leaves were of gold; and afterwards to a third, where the leaves were all glittering diamonds. And the soldier broke a branch from each; and every time there was a loud noise, which made the youngest sister tremble with fear. But the eldest still said it was only the princes, who were crying for joy.

Awaiting them on the other side of the underground grove were three handsome princes, who seemed to be waiting there for the princesses. The soldier shuddered, for he could see that they were demons, who had enthralled the young women.

Soon he saw a fine, illuminated castle from which came the merry music of horns and trumpets, played by unseen musicians. They entered, and each demon danced with his princess; and the soldier saw it all. When any of the princesses had a cup of wine set by her, he drank it all up, so that when she put the cup to her mouth it was empty. At this, too, the youngest sister was terribly frightened, but the eldest always silenced her.

They danced on till three o'clock in the morning, and then all their shoes were worn out, so that they were obliged to leave. The demons led them back to the grove, and the princesses made their way through the winding caves, promising to come again the next night.

When they came to the stairs, the soldier ran on before the princesses, and laid himself down. And as the tired sisters slowly came up, they heard him snoring in his bed and they said, "Now all is quite safe." Then they undressed themselves, put away their fine clothes, pulled off their shoes, and went to bed.

In the morning the soldier said nothing about what had happened, but determined to see more of this strange adventure, and went again on the second and third nights. Everything happened just as before: the princesses danced till their shoes were worn to pieces, and then returned home. On the third night the soldier carried away one of the golden cups as a token of where he had been.

As soon as the time came when he was to declare the secret, he was taken before the king. In his robes he carried the three branches and the golden cup; and the three princesses stood listening behind the door to hear what he would say.

The king asked him. "Where do my daughters dance at night?"

The soldier answered, "With three demon princes in a castle underground." And then he told the king all that had happened, and showed him the branches and the golden cup which he had brought with him.

The king called for the princesses, and asked them whether what the soldier said was true. When they saw that they were discovered, and that it was of no use to deny what had happened, they confessed it all.

So the king asked the soldier which of the princesses he would choose for his wife; and he answered, "I am no longer young. Give me the eldest."

So they were married that very day, and the soldier was named the king's heir.

It was a popular story and was well-applauded. Leliana's cheeks were pink with excitement and satisfaction. The Orlesians, too, found it a charming and gallant tale. The Wardens, at their own table, had their own opinions.

"I liked the part with the apostate," said Jowan. "He deserved some sort of reward."

Tara grinned. "Maybe he got the gold cup out of the newly-made prince. It would only be fair."

"Ha!" Anders scoffed. "I know old soldiers! He probably gave the mage a boot in the backside for his trouble."

"I certainly would," Catriona agreed, utterly shameless, "if somebody tried to talk *me* out of a gold cup. Maybe he'd get a purse of silver instead."

"At least!" Quinn said, indignant. "I wouldn't turn him away!"

Maeve ruffled his hair. "You're not an *old* soldier, either. After a few more years, you'd probably give him a boot in the backside, too."

Galehaut was a charming place: just what a country manor should be. The demesne was not large, but it gave de Montfort sufficient living space for himself and his men-at-arms, and large stables for their excellent horses. One stable, newer than the rest, stood apart, on the other side of the compound, and was built very solidly of stone. It had a wide set of double doors, opening on a large paddock. The grooms there wore thick leather armor and helmets with movable visors.

The dogs sniffed and growled. Scout paced restlessly, looking up at Bronwyn.

"What is it, Scout? What's in there?"

Scout had no idea, actually, but he thought it smelled strange and rather menacing. Amber sniffed, too, whined, and lifted a paw, as if uncertain whether to charge or to run. Scrapper, Magister, and Lily barked, and then huddled with the other dogs.

The grooms swung open the heavy doors. Prosper

called, "Leopold, dear boy! Come! We wish to see you!"

Out trundled a massive body, sleek and muscled. It stood well over man height at the shoulder, and its body was long, with a powerful tail. It had smallish wings, and was actually larger than the dragon Bronwyn had killed in the Elven Temple. There were a few frightened screams mixed in with the shouts of wonder. Everyone one took two steps back.

"A wyvern!" cried Bronwyn. "A real wyvern!"

Loghain narrowed his eyes at the Orlesian. "What kind of trick is this?" he asked, his voice menacing.

"No trick," Prosper assured them. "An egg was brought to me. When it hatched, I was there, and I imprinted on the creature, much as you have on your fine hound. I have succeeded in training Leopold. While griffons may be extinct, there are other creatures in Thedas that might be effective in combat: even more effective than horses, when it comes to fighting monsters."

It was an intimidating creature. It was also a magnificent creature. Its shining hide was dark blue, striped and marked here and there in a vivid yellow. Spiny frills trembled threateningly by its ears; its eyes were golden and enormous. Bronwyn tried to remember everything she had ever read about wyverns. They were said to be extinct in Ferelden. This one looked plenty lively to her.

"Don't wyverns spit poison?" Loghain asked abruptly. Of course, as Gwaren's symbol was the wyvern, Loghain could be trusted to have read all he could about wyverns.

"They do indeed," Prosper assured him. "A most lethal poison. Leopold only spits poison on command. It somewhat limits his value in hunting, since anything poisoned by him is quite inedible for everyone else. However, he has other means of killing: his claws, his fangs, his tail, his great body mass."

Behind them, nobles and Wardens alike were gazing on Leopold in awe.

"A splendid beast!" Morrigan murmured, avidly taking in every detail. If she could master shape-shifting into such a creature, she would be in a far stronger position facing both darkspawn... and... someday... Flemeth.

Leopold swung his heavy head in her direction and blinked slowly, not reluctant to accept the admiration of a sensible human. So many of the feeble two-legs were too fearful to look at him properly. Many of them here today were fearful, too, but others were very not. These smelled of respect and proper caution. Leopold preened, flicking his frills wide and stretching out to his full length.

"So..." Loghain considered what sorts of uses a wyvern could be good for. "He will attack the darkspawn? Your enemies?"

"He does. While he cannot fly like a dragon, he's extremely quick, and..." Prosper left them in suspense, before he vaulted into the saddle on the wyvern's back. "...and he can be ridden!"

With that, he put Leopold through their usual exercises, only now mounted on the wyvern's back. The crowd watched, delighted and amazed. He took the wyvern

around the paddock, and then reversed, and then performed a serpentine maneuver as if on horseback. Leopold reared on command, and uttered a terrifying shriek of defiance. Prosper smirked triumphantly at his guests.

"I want one!" declared Brosca.

"Very impressive," said Loghain. "Let's talk."

"You!" Prosper shouted to the grooms. "Feed Leopold!" He slid easily down the creature's back, and gave him a parting pat. Then he strolled over to the Fereldans, feeling that he had made his place secure.

"Very impressive, indeed," Bronwyn agreed. "I previously came across people who had trained dragons to attack, but they did not ride them. The creatures clearly understood human language, just as your wyvern does. Where did you find the egg?"

"The Planascene Forest, I suppose," muttered Loghain, thinking rapidly.

"The very place," said Prosper. "It was brought to me by a hunter as a curiosity. As a rule, all nests are destroyed when they are found, but perhaps that is wasteful. The essential element is that the egg must be kept viable enough to hatch, and the person present at the hatching will be the one to whom the creature bonds. I was extraordinarily lucky."

"But then you successfully trained the creature as well," Loghain pressed him, trying not to be swept away by visions of a wall of charging wyverns, crushing all before them. The wyvern gulped down great gobbets of raw

meat, tossing back its head as it swallowed.

"A similar technique might work with dragons as well," Bronwyn said, also watching entranced. "It would be worth exploring, though of course it would take years. How old is Leopold?"

"Only nine months old, Your Majesty. He has not yet attained his full growth and strength."

Morrigan approached, Anders with her. She studied the wyvern as a miser studies gold. She gave Duke Prosper a very graceful curtsy. He bowed in return, recognizing the beautiful woman he had noticed at the Court in Denerim.

"Might I have leave, my lord," she asked softly, "to examine your remarkable pet at closer quarters? Might you persuade him to let me *touch* him?"

Prosper was impressed by her nerve, and did not see the quick, amused looks exchanged by Bronwyn and Loghain. Instead, rather flattered, he showed off Leopold at greater length, putting him through his paces, ordering him to spit his venom at a target, allowing the fair Lady Morrigan and her escort to touch his hide, his frill, his wings; to peer at his fangs and claws. For that matter, Leopold was flattered, too.

Other Wardens came closer, and Morrigan asked an elf to obtain a sample of the venom. Some among the Wardens were clearly mages, and they gathered gravely together, discussing Leopold in low tones.

"— how resistant would darkspawn be to the poison?"

"— what kind of stamina do they have?"

“—Interesting. I think it could take on an ogre with no trouble at all.”

“—I still say dragons are better. Poison only works on living creatures. It's no good against golems or siege works, for that matter.”

“—And you can't use them together. Wyverns and dragons are natural enemies.”

One of the mages laughed. “Only real ones. Not magical creatures.”

Bronwyn whispered to Loghain. “I don't know about wyvern eggs, but I've found dragon eggs in two different places in Ferelden. After what we found in Amaranthine, I believe there must be dragons in the north of the arling. It's possible there are still nests up in the mountains at Haven, where I found the false Andraste. Perhaps Cauthrien should have a look at her new bannorn sometime soon. She could be there in two days, if she followed my map carefully.”

Loghain looked about and saw Cauthrien, standing nearby, speaking quietly to Alistair and Emrys. It would have been a good idea, were they not in the process of going to war.

“I'm not sure I can spare her at the moment. We'll have to see what the mages can make of the Orlesian's pet monster. Surely more of them can learn that shape-shifting trick.”

The Warden mages — Anders, Tara, Jowan, Petra, and Niall — were gathered round, listening to Morrigan's cool voice quietly discoursing on the qualities of the creature before them. Loghain wished that they had brought some of the mages traveling with the army with them as well.

Uldred seemed powerful, as did his loyal follower, that blonde woman Gwyneth. He was not sure about the others. That mage girl Kieli, for example, he could no more see turning into a wyvern than he could himself.

Duke Prosper, seeing that his demonstration had been received favorably, insinuated himself into the conversation.

“I understand, Your Majesties, that my young cousins, the Imperial Princesses, are safely lodged at Roc du Chevalier. Have you any particular plans for them?”

“You are concerned for them,” Bronwyn said sweetly. “That is very amiable of you. Rest assured, the ladies are safe, comfortable and exactly where we want them to be.”

“Of course,” Duke Prosper smiled, thinking about what kind of reward he might expect for services rendered. “Of course. I merely mention them because in the lamentable absence of the Empress, Orlais currently has no ruler to keep the peace while we pursue the darkspawn. They are certainly the next in blood. A puppet Empress, married to a reliable consort who has sworn homage to you, might be of inestimable help in pacifying the country.”

Bronwyn's face was blank. It was obvious now what Prosper had come for, but she was not entirely comfortable about giving an innocent young woman into his care. Loghain was more pragmatic. The girls in question were Orlesian, after all.

“Let us say, for the sake of argument, that you were to be a candidate for such a princess's hand. Which one would you choose?”

Duke Prosper gave them a smiling, self-deprecating bow. "I am no longer young, Your Majesty. Give me the eldest."



CELANDINE, EMPRESS ELECT OF ORLAIS

CHAPTER II



THE WORLD HAS CHANGED

THE MAGES SPENT A GREAT DEAL OF THE VISIT TO GALEHAUT STUDYING LEOPOLD. Even those who had not mastered shape-shifting before were galvanized by the power and majesty of the wyvern and the possibilities that such a creature represented. Morrigan liked the Warden mages well enough to coach them through a rigorous study of the wyvern's anatomy; his movements and his vocalizations, the smell of his poison. An experienced shape-shifter herself, she found interesting challenges presented by the wyvern.

"I have asked the grooms for the sweepings of the creature's stable: pieces of hide, claws, quills from the frill. We will need these to charm our garments. Otherwise we can only shift between beast and nakedness, which would be distracting to a rational enemy, but simply inconvenient and dangerous when fighting darkspawn."

Inside the big stable, a groom presented Morrigan with a large crate of such waste. Morrigan dismissed him, and the mages spent a long time over the objects, touching them, dis-

cussing them, slitting their garments and weaving charms into them along with odd bits of wyvern. Morrigan had learned from a great mistress of the art, and knew a multitude of training exercises for shape-shifting. All of the mages had already done them before, but the intimacy with such an impressive creature caused them to make much greater progress than they had in the past, when trying to become a cat, a bird, a bear. Perhaps it was the fact that each of them really, really wanted to be something so powerful as a wyvern. Intent was always vital in performing magic.

They went back to the paddock and again examined Leopold. Morrigan leaned against him, listening to the mighty heartbeat, moving with the inhalations and exhalations of the enormous lungs. After some time they left the other guests once more to their politicking and their wine, and went behind the big stable. The rest of the visitors did not feel the sudden wave of air pressure, or hear the muffled exclamations. They did not particularly notice that Leopold's head swiveled around eagerly, as he sniffed the breeze.

"We-l-l-l... Morrigan..." Anders managed, backing away from the sleek, dark blue menace. "That's... interesting..."

"Amazing," breathed Petra.

"Scary," muttered Tara.

"I feel I can almost do it," said Jowan. "Almost, I mean..." He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. His arms turned blue and developed very impressive claws. Niall laughed so hard he fell to the ground. Jowan was briefly horrified, until the

claws retracted and the arms became human once more. Morrigan shifted back herself in order to scold them.

"An acceptable first attempt," she praised Jowan. She turned to others, not about to tolerate adolescent behavior. "May I point out," she said, with more than a touch of acid, "that the ability to assume such a shape would quite alter the balance of power between mage and Templar? It would, dare I say it, change the world."

Anders was still laughing, but not at Jowan. "Morrigan, the world changed from the moment I met you!"

Astrid approved of Jader. There was good stonework here, and the architecture of the dwarven quarter showed a proper reverence for their underground origins. It all looked far more prosperous than Denerim, certainly. The dwarves came out in force to greet her, too. Everyone was impressed by her golems.

"Atrast vala, Paragon!"

"Hail, Astrid Goldenhand!"

"Free drinks for the Paragon and her officers at the Paragon's Cup!"

"Stone preserve you, Paragon!"

"We're with you!"

It would be quite nice if they were. Astrid wanted to recruit soldiers for the dwarven army, and also craftsmen for her thaigs. The soldiers would have to be in their own unit, of course. The warrior caste would never accept them into the army proper, and the Jader dwarves might not care for the restrictions imposed on them by the Legion of the Dead. Jader,

the closest surface city to Orzammar, had a huge dwarven population. Why not have a company of Jader dwarves? And in it, a strong unit of engineers... perhaps a handful of Wardens, too. Astrid had some ideas she wanted to discuss with Bronwyn. It was absurd for warriors to rush at the horde, waving swords like that fool Cailan, when there was plenty a good engineer could do to soften up the horde first.

Velanna and Ailill, her Dalish elves, were moving along quickly, their eyes a bit wild. Maybe they'd been underground too long. Ailill had closed in on himself, and Velanna had become almost maniacally abrasive. Maybe they needed a change of duty. Astrid was fairly tired of them, anyway. Maybe she could find a sane human mage. Maybe two humans, who could keep each other company. Ailill and Velanna would be even crazier by now, if they hadn't had each other. It was something else to talk over with Bronwyn. For now, she had to keep on task.

'*The Paragon's Cup?*' Astrid decided to make an appearance at that clever innkeeper's establishment, and see what kind of concrete support the dwarves of Jader were really prepared to give. Free drinks would be quite welcome. First, however, she must meet with Bronwyn, who had also been doing exceedingly well for herself.

She greeted her as an equal, of course. She owed that to the dwarves. No Paragon should humble herself before a human king or queen. On the other hand, she liked Bronwyn and thought her a sound leader. There were mutual

bows and then a warrior's greeting, hands clasped to forearms. Bronwyn had considerably provided a chair up on the dais, next to her throne. That pleased the dwarves, too.

"How fares Orzammar, Paragon?" asked Loghain.

"Well, King Loghain. Our defenses have never been better. The dwarves can send a mighty force abroad without fearing for the safety of the dwarven kingdom. The Amgarrak Road has a strong barrier door, cutting it off from the western and southern Deep Roads, and connecting it securely to Orzammar. Our reclaimed thaigs prosper."

A cheer rose up from the dwarves in the throne room, and from the Wardens, too.

Bronwyn said, "The security of our worthy allies, the dwarven people, is of the greatest importance to us. We plan to march west soon, and look forward to once again marching with you."

Astrid smiled. "We'll be there."

Of course, in private, they had details to go over. The dwarven Wardens were invited to that discussion. Their Dalish vanished early on, greeted by the other elves as their long-lost brother and sister. Velanna's voice rose shrilly in joy and relief to see her own kind at last.

"I never want to go underground again! The dwarves can have Orzammar and welcome! They're so —"

Thankfully, the door shut on the noise.

Brosca greeted Astrid with great enthusiasm, and of course wanted to know about her family.

"How's little Endrin?"

Astrid was glad she could give her good news. "Little Endrin is big, bouncing, and healthy. Your sister's beauty is undiminished. The King was in good spirits, since he's very satisfied with the progress of the war. Oh... and your sister is expecting again. The baby's due in a month or so."

Brosca beamed with joy. "That's our Rica! Another prince!"

Astrid shrugged. "Or princess."

Brosca's smile faded.

Astrid laid her golden hand reassuringly on Brosca's shoulder. "Don't worry. If it's a girl, I told Bhelen I'd adopt her. The more Aeducans, the better."

Loghain leaned over to Bronwyn, whispering questions about that situation. He occasionally forgot that the aristocratic Astrid and the common Brosca were aunts of the identical little prince. A curious situation, and one that could only have arisen in Orzammar.

There were more polite preliminaries, and then they sat down to some serious talk over a big map of Orlais.

Loghain presented their general strategic situation — which was not at all bad — plus what they knew so far of the fate of the Orlesian Imperial army, the fall of Val Royeaux, and the movements of other Grey Warden contingents. Bronwyn gave some general background on what tactics they themselves had developed.

"It's clear that the Archdemon is our essential target. I've had some of my people working on the problem of a flying opponent."

Briefly, she summarized what Carver and Jowan had

learned from the Nevarran Wardens about traditional dragonhunting. She gave her own experiences with using bombs and magic to bring down a dragon in flight. Loghain then discussed the use of the ballistae which had damaged Flemeth's wing and brought her down to ground level. Catapults could throw bombs. For that matter, so could their golems. Shale could carry huge sacks of bombs and grenades as it waded into battle. The explosives of the Glavonak brothers could deal death on a wide scale to the darkspawn.

Astrid herself had some exciting news of dwarven ingenuity to share.

"The workshop of Smith Garin has come up with a new weapon." She motioned Falkor forward. He carried a strange object: Gleaming steel and silverite, its butt was shaped like that of a crossbow and it had a trigger mechanism, but there was no bow section, but instead a long metal tube with a kind of sighting device at the end.

"Garin calls it 'the Airbow,' said Astrid. "It shoots lead pellets he calls 'bullets,' and it operates by means of a coiled silverite spring-loaded piston contained within a compression chamber, and separate from the barrel. Cocking the bow — " She demonstrated this with a click " — causes the piston assembly to compress the spring until a small hook on the rear of the piston engages a lock; pulling the trigger releases the lock and allows the spring to decompress, pushing the piston forward, thereby compressing the air in the chamber directly behind the bullet — " she held up

a small sphere of lead. "Like this. The bullets are easily molded, which makes them cheaper and faster to produce than arrows. When you pull the trigger, the bullet moves forward, propelled by an expanding column of air. All this takes place in a fraction of a second. This particular model is enhanced with Runes of Impact and Striking."

She flipped the butt of the weapon against her left shoulder, sighting down the barrel at a porcelain figurine on a stand across the room. She pulled the trigger. A muffled "pop," and the figure shattered. The missile continued on and slammed into the wall, penetrating over a handsbreadth into the plaster, wood and stone. The lead missile was dug out of the wall and examined. It had flattened out to the diameter of a sovereign. It would have torn a great hole in a darkspawn's chest.

"Oooo!" rose the delighted murmur.

Bronwyn rolled her eyes, amused and tolerant. There was nothing a Warden loved like new death-dealing devices. She rather liked them herself. Loghain's gaze was fixed and hungry. This was a splendid ranged weapon for someone who was not a skilled archer, and who might not have the physical strength to cock a heavy crossbow.

"If I may?"

Astrid was delighted to show off her new toy, and demonstrated how it was loaded with the lead bullets. The Airbow could hold up to five in reserve, as well as the one in the shooting chamber. Shooting the bullet caused the next one in the reserve to enter the chamber in its turn.

The interior of the barrel itself was incised with a long spiral, which improved the accuracy of the weapon.

"Really?" asked Loghain. "That's a fine piece of smithcrafting."

He went to the window, opened it, and held the weapon as Astrid had. It was designed for a dwarf, and so did not suit his longer reach, but he had no trouble picking up how to support the barrel with one hand while operating the trigger mechanism. The sight was not much different than that of a crossbow, though more refined. Loghain took aim at a bronze windvane in the shape of a lion at the far end of a roof jutting out perpendicularly from under their window. He breathed out slowly and squeezed the trigger.

Another muffled "pop!" followed instantly by a clanging "crack!" as the bullet struck the bronze lion, blasting off its head. The windvane spun wildly.

"Whoa!" Brosca actually patted Loghain on the back. "That'll show 'em, Big Guy."

Loghain smiled grimly. He was conscious of the recoil against his shoulder. It was a good, hard punch, but not hard enough to trouble him, even if he had shot several times. Nonetheless, someone using this weapon regularly would likely want some padded leather there.

"This weapon," he said quietly, "will change the world."

Bronwyn only smiled and took the Airbow from him. She had heard of repeating crossbows, but they were delicate objects, prone to breakdowns. If a Bowman could shoot six times before reloading, he would achieve a rate



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of fire superior to the best traditional archer — at least for those six shots. And the weapon seemed accurate... at least at fairly short range. So far, she had seen nothing to indicate that it could rival a longbow for that.

Hakan spoke up. "Could you poison the bullets?" He waved her hands expressively. "I don't mean pouring poison on them. Couldn't you put a little poison inside? Form the bullet around a bit of crystal or pressed glass?"

"I don't know," said Astrid. "It might be worth the experiment, though it would make the bullets more expensive. It might be easier to stamp them with runes."

"We'll have the Glavonaks see what they can do," said Loghain. "That young Warden Adaia, too. And I want as many of those Airbows as the dwarves can make."

"It just so happens..." Astrid smiled serenely. "That I have two with me right now. Askil, the gifts. One for the King, and one for the Queen."

"A wonderful gift, indeed!" Bronwyn laughed, teasing her. "As long as it's not red. It isn't, is it?"

Astrid grinned and shook her head. "Just good, sound silverite and steel. With white runestones and your names in gold."



Many of the new soldiers in the fortresses along Gherlen's Pass had never seen a Dalish elf in their lives. Most Orlesians had certainly never seen a caravan of them, hallas picking their dainty way along the road, pulling the aravels behind them. Veterans of Ostagar merely



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greeted them, told them that Bronwyn was in the city of Jader, and pointed out the way.

For the most part, the Dalish preferred to camp outside the walls. Siofranni, Merrill, and Lanaya, however, with Thanovir, Maynriel, and a party of warriors, presented themselves at the gate. The Fereldan guards there knew their business too well to attempt to bar their way. A runner was sent ahead to alert the Palace, and a pair of soldiers escorted the Dalish through the colorful streets of Jader.

The Dalish were gazed on in wonder, especially by the city elves, who had previously been comfortably certain that the Dalish elves were a myth. Disabused of this notion, some of the younger elves followed in the wake of the Dalish, too timid to speak to them, but thinking them extraordinary, glamorous beings.

"Now this is much prettier than Denerim!" Merrill exclaimed, looking about her. "So much neater and cleaner. The houses don't all look about to fall down. That's nice for the people. I wouldn't want a house to fall on me!"

Lanaya said less, but was equally consumed with curiosity. She did not remember much of her early childhood before her rescue by the Dalish, but she knew she came from a shemlen city and had been born in an Alienage. She hoped that the Alienage here in Jader was better than the awful place in Denerim. They must pay a call on their city cousins. The Sabrae clan had had some luck in luring the poor creatures back to the happier, nobler ways of the Dalish. Lanaya would



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like to save some of them as well. And there was the burgeoning little village in the new elven homeland. Surely that would do for those who must have a roof over their heads.

Siofranni was not so sure if leaving the city was the ideal outcome for everyone: not if the elves lived in the kind of beautiful houses she saw along the fine, wide streets. She had enjoyed her comfortable quarters at Roc du Chevalier. The problem, as the young Warden saw it, was not so much that the city elves lived in cities: it was that they were poor, and thus could not enjoy the pleasures of city life.

They were all astonished at the majestic beauty of Emerald Square, anchored on either side by two huge buildings of greenstone. They felt very relieved when Danith and Nuala emerged from the palace, and ran down the steps, smiling, to greet them.

"*Aneth ara!*" Danith exclaimed, her arms out. "You are most welcome!"

They were made welcome, again and again, by the rest of the Dalish, by the other Wardens, by Bronwyn, by Loghain, and then were invited to join them at dinner. They were invited to stay in the palace, too, for that matter, but were not pressed when they explained that they preferred to stay in the Dalish camp. Siofranni, as a Warden, told them she would be staying at the palace with her fellow Wardens.

"I must hear what my comrades have been doing," she said. Adaia whispered in her ear, eyes dancing, telling her of the charming room she would share with her. It



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sounded very inviting.

It was not until after dinner that Tara could take Lanaya and Merrill aside and urge them to follow her.

"Let me show you something I found! Bring the warriors, too. Everybody's welcome!" She lowered her voice, "Well, all elves, anyway."

Very intrigued, the Dalish party crowded into Tara and Zevran's exquisite room. Already present were Danith, of course, and Cathair, Steren, Nuala, and Darach. Velanna was there, and Ailill. Both of them had the look of escaped prisoners, rejoicing in their freedom. Siofranni and Adaia had made themselves comfortable on some pink satin cushions. Merrill had no eyes for anything in the room other than the lofty, gilded object in the corner. She had recognized the eluvian immediately.

How angry she had been angry with Marethari for disposing of the other eluvian — the one that had poisoned Danith and Tamlen in the forest. This, however, was undamaged and untainted.

Since Tara had determinedly kept it a secret, Danith had not seen the mirror before that moment. She backed away, alarmed.

"Don't worry!" Tara assured her. "it's not like the one that infected you."

Merrill cried, "It's perfect! I can't believe it!" She told the puzzled elves, "It's an eluvian! It was made in Arlathan by our ancestors the ancient elvhen, long, long ago!"



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An awed silence filled the room.

"This is a noble thing," muttered Maynriel. "We live in an age of wonders."

"It belongs to the elves," said Tara. "No one is to speak of it to anyone else. My fellow Wardens only know that I claimed a splendid mirror as plunder." She had told Brosca a bit more than that, but saw no reason to bring it up. Brosca could be trusted not to blab a friend's secrets.

Tara's insistence that this be purely an elvish matter was greeted with general approval. No one had the least desire to share a lost treasure of the elvhen. Velanna declared her agreement vehemently and repeatedly. She had never heard of such an object, but if it was elvish, than not even torture would force a word of it from her to either shemlen or durgen'len.

Lanaya had been told about eluvians by Zathrian, who had known a great deal of ancient lore. He had never seen one, however, or spoken to anyone who had. Lanaya was thrilled at this glimpse of the glory of long-lost Arlathan.

"It's beautiful! I can sense its power, but what does it actually do?"

Tara gave them what information she possessed, derived from the book she had read at the Circle library. Merrill, however, was examining the mirror in detail already, murmuring unknown words in her sweet voice. The reflective surface wavered, and then ripples spread out from the center, as if she had dropped a stone into a forest pool.

Abruptly, her chant stopped, and she backed away,



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shocked by her own success. Her words came back in a soft, distorted echo. The elves murmured in wonder and then were absolutely silent, as they heard the soft sussuration reflected back at them. Merrill whispered a word of command, and the surface smoothed out once more.

"I think," Lanaya said softly, "we should be very careful about what we say to this mirror. We do not know who may be listening."

"That's true," agreed Tara, a little discouraged. "We might be communicating with the Black Divine, for all we know."

"We must study it," Merrill insisted. "Not only could we use it to speak to others far away – we could use it to travel. We hadn't many books in our clan, but we had a book about the eluvians. There is a spell to make them open their paths among the worlds. Different eluvians led to different places. We will need some blood..."

"Blood magic!" cried Lanaya, horrified. Everyone fidgeted with dismay.

"We can use mine," Merrill said, unruffled. "It's not to control anyone, but to let the eluvian know that an elf wishes to step through. Only the blood and magic of the elvhen can unlock all of its powers. Our enemies the magisters could not make full use of an eluvian for that reason, not even with elven thralls. They did not even know what was necessary."

"Well, if it's just that..." Tara said. "It's more like the Templars using blood for tracking, and nobody – other than mages – has a problem with that."



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"It is good to know that the evil Tevinters could not use them," growled Darach. "But where does such a path lead?"

"Our wise ancestors," murmured Lanaya, "would not lead us to an evil place, or a dangerous one."

"Not deliberately, I grant you," said Zevran. "However, if this is connected to another eluvian somewhere, perhaps that, too, has been moved from its original location."

"There is writing on the frame," Tara said, "but I can't make it out. It's in a very old script that's quite unknown to me."

Merrill peered at it and then read it off:

*"Melava inan enansal
ir su araval tu elvaral
u na emma abelas
in elgar sa vir mana
in tu setheneran din emma na
lath sulevin
lath araval ena
arlar ven tu vir mahvir
melana 'nehn
enasal ir sa lethalin."*

The Dalish looked at each other, shocked and rather excited. Tara looked at each of them, but her knowledge of the elven language was not sufficient to translate something spoken so quickly.

"I'm sorry," Aadaia said, greatly daring. "I don't understand it at all. Please tell me what it means."

Merrill smiled, and hesitantly rendered the ancient



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tongue into common Trade language.

*"Time was once a blessing
but long journeys are made longer
when alone within.
Take spirit from the long ago
but do not dwell in lands no longer yours.*

*Be certain in need,
and the path will emerge
to a home tomorrow
and time will again
be the joy it once was."*

"Do not dwell in lands no longer yours..." Lanaya whispered. "Is it our doom, or is it offering us a new way?"

Merrill was radiant. "'The path will emerge to a home tomorrow.' Well, we'll just have to see about that. There is an incantation — actually several different incantations, depending on which eluvian you are using... and one needs to prick one's finger... only a drop of blood is needed to find the way through... and then... we shall see, won't we?"

"Wait..." Tara said. "You're just going to... step through?"

"Of course," Merrill replied. "That is what it's for. How can I know where it goes, if I don't go there?"

"You cannot go alone," Maynriel spoke up. "I shall go with you, Keeper."

"That is kind of you, *lethallin*."

"I, too," Danith declared, forcing herself to master her fear of the thing. "We shall be safer as three."

"Now, wait!" Tara said, rather taken aback at how events had accelerated. "Why don't you... I don't know, just put your finger in first, and see what happens? All right? Or I'll do it. Maybe a little finger? So if something bad happens, I don't lose anything essential?"

"That sounds very sensible to me!" Zevran seconded her loyally.

"If you like," Merrill agreed. "A finger only. That way we will at least know that it works. But I shall do it first." Instantly she drew her belt knife and pressed the sharp tip to her index finger — much to Tara's exasperation — and then intoned an incantation.

"Vena an areth!"

Nothing happened. Merrill slumped in disappointment.

"Not the right one, then. Let's see..."

Siofranni whispered to Adaia, *"I go to the safe place..."*

Biting her lip, Merrill tried again.

"Ar in Setheneran!"

"I dwell in the Land of Waking Dreams," murmured Siofranni.

No response. The elves sighed in sympathy.

Merrill straightened her thin shoulders, and took a deep breath. "I'm sure this is the one!"

"Ero din an ti Arla!"

To their astonishment, the eluvian began humming. Everyone in the room but Merrill pressed back against the wall. Merrill then slowly reached out to the mirror's surface, which had ceased reflecting and was now a silvery pool of light. At the touch of her fingertip, the sur-

face dimpled like water touched lightly, and then there sounded a low note, sweet as a harp struck softly, and her finger disappeared into the eluvian. The once-hard surface of the mirror resembled a viscous, metallic liquid, quicksilver bright. It swirled like a whirlpool.

"Oh!" cried Merrill.

"Keeper! Be careful!" urged Thanovir. "Step away!"

"I'm not hurt... I'll just be a moment..." said Merrill, and then quickly stepped forward. There was a soft, sucking sound, and the young mage vanished, the silvery whirlpool drawing her in.

"Mythal, protect her!" screamed Danith. She drew her knife and slashed at her palm, running at the mirror.

"Ero din an ti Arla! Ero din an ti Arla! Ero din—"

In a flash, she was through the eluvian and the surface rippled with her passing.

Grizzled Maynriel uttered some words in elvish that were incomprehensible to those who were not Dalish, and quite shocking to those who were. He, too, sliced a shallow cut into his palm, and stalked toward the mirror, shaking his head at the recklessness of youth.

"Ero din an ti Arla!" He practically snarled the words, and strode fearlessly through the swirling depths. After a moment, the mirror stilled and grew hard once more, reflecting the stunned faces in the room.

The three adventurers were gone for some time. When they returned, they told their friends that the world had changed.

"But what did you see?" Tara shouted. She was not the only one yelling.

After a panic-stricken wait, she had been ready to follow Merrill, Danith, and Maynriel into the eluvian, when they suddenly reappeared from it, their eyes filled with remembered wonders.

Merrill was too dreamy to reply coherently; Maynriel too overwhelmed. It was Danith who answered.

"Not all the elves of ancient Arlathan perished or were enslaved. There were those who escaped. They have been waiting for news from us for a long, long time. They are waiting to welcome us... home."

Jader offered some new diversions to Loghain. Having no particular respect for it as he would for an ancient Fereldan settlement, he felt free to reimagine and reconstruct it any way he liked. The palace and the chantry certainly needed no other adornment. His attention was currently centered around the gate houses, the barracks, and the dockyards.

All of them were well-built and convenient. The gate houses were given into the charge of reliable Fereldan officers, who set up guard rotas composed of reliable Fereldan soldiers. The barracks were filled with the Fereldan army, with the new Jaderian contingents interspersed in such a way as to make it difficult for them to unite and hold any part of the building effectively if they decided to turn traitor. Loghain toured the barracks and

admired them at length. The facilities gave him all sorts of ideas for improvements at West Hill and even at Fort Drakon.

It was at the dockyards that he had the greatest impact. Construction on the additions was complete there. In addition, the shipbuilders had finished work on one splendid new warship, and another was nearly ready. The captains whose ships they were to be were Kirkwallers by birth, and not displeased that Jader had a king and queen who would pay them, since Empress Celene seemed unlikely to meet her financial obligations, either now or in the future. The new ship's name was changed to the DRAGONSLAYER, and it was launched with considerable fanfare. As a bow to their dwarven allies, the second ship would be named the PARAGON.

His engineers were working on the harbor defenses now. An improved wall was under construction, with a number of catapults, ballistae, and trebuchets being installed in the forts on either side of the harbor to prevent any enemy vessel – or even fleet – from sailing into Jader Bay. In addition, a boom was being forged. The existence of the Horn made that a tricky piece of engineering, but the dwarves insisted it could be done.

Looking out to sea, relishing the thought of repelling all enemies, he did not hear people approaching until they were quite close. He turned to see a group of dwarves inspecting the wharves.

"King Loghain!" shouted Astrid, giving him a wave.

"Paragon!"

Brosca was there, and some of the other dwarves he

knew, as well as a few he did not. He was feeling quite friendly toward Astrid at the moment, and not just because of the Airbow. She was doing good work recruiting among the dwarves, and they would have another band of sound engineers traveling to the west.

Brosca had one with her now, and was actually holding his hand. The lad was a mild-looking fellow, very abashed by the high-toned company he was keeping.

"Loghain!" Brosca shouted, bouncing down the stone steps, dragging her not-unwilling captive along. "This is Torvald! He was really nice to me when I was first here spying. He even bought me a drink and a skewer of Jader sausages!"

The dwarf turned a dull red, and bowed deeply. "Your Majesty."

"Well met, Torvald." Loghain said, too amused to laugh at the poor fellow outright. "A friend of Warden Brosca needs no other recommendation to me."

One of the older dwarves — probably a relative — brightened at the words. Loghain prepared to be petitioned for yet another contract.



The journey from the Circle to Jader lasted only three days. It was just enough to be a splendid adventure, and not so much as to render everyone utterly exhausted. First Enchanter Irving was rather enjoying himself. When he grew bored with the scenery, he arranged himself comfortably on the bedrolls in the lead wagon, and read the books he had brought along. The current one was a delightfully

spicy romance in a serious-looking blue leather binding. Since no one else in the wagon could read Antivan, Irving enjoyed the benefits of knowing all the written languages of Thedas, as well as his reputation as a serious scholar. No one had the least idea what Count Fornicatio was doing to his sister-in-law and her mother. He sighed, a bit nostalgic. Dear Wynne had always liked a hot-blooded novel.

"I can't believe that Loghain had the gall to seize the Aeonar!"

Irving sighed, and set down his book. Knight-Commander Greagoir's leather lungs had repeated those words, over and over again, for most of the day, ever since they had come across the small company of Templars who had sworn to fight the Blight for the duration. Irving was thoroughly tired of hearing them.

"Well, he did. It's fairly clear that the staff there had gone rogue."

"Yes, yes, that's what young Desmond said, but it should have been turned over to us to investigate first..."

Irving said nothing more, but returned to his trashy Antivan novel. Ser Desmond, once outer guard of the Aeonar, had had plenty to say about the atrocities he had been shown once the prison was liberated.

"I joined the Templars to make the world a better and safer place, not to torture innocent people..."

Irving smiled tightly, suspecting that "innocent people" did not include mages of any race, age, or gender. At any rate, what Loghain found at the Aeonar had got him exercised enough that he had closed the place down alto-

gether. He had shipped the priests off to Denerim with a fiery letter, and sent the most offensive of the Templars to Orlais. The timeline was not clear to Irving. Had Loghain known about the darkspawn at that time? Probably. The old mage smiled quietly, enjoying the image. He hoped the Templars were set ashore as close to Val Royeaux as possible. Greagoir was still fuming about jurisdiction, but he would simply have to get over it.

The world has changed, he mused, whether Greagoir likes it or not.

They headed quite the formidable little company: ten Templars and thirty-six mages. Some of the mages were quite young: only just past their Harrowing. Greagoir had let Healer apprentices go last time, but had since thought again about it, and had insisted that all mages be Harrowed. No one had gone bonkers and turned into an abomination yet, even when faced with slit-trench latrines.

After sleep, breakfast, and time to reflect on what Danith had told them of the place to which they had traveled by means of the eluvian, the elves had some decisions to make.

Other groups went through the eluvian briefly, and then came back: first Tara, Adaia, Lanaya, and Darach, and then the others. In threes or fours, all the elves saw the place beyond the portal for themselves. It was not the Fade. It was a real place, and astonishing. They had brief, awkward, but excitingly heartfelt conversations with those they met there. The language had diverged a

great deal and required patience. Each who returned was rather silent afterwards, feeling humbled and ignorant, but brimful of hope and possibility.

Lanaya said, "Not all elves will wish to leave Thedas. Not all Dalish would exchange a life in the forest for this brave new world. Or not right away, or soon. It will take time, but it would be a great deed."

Nuala whispered. "They have preserved so much of the ancient wisdom, and gone far beyond it, too. I fear our distant cousins think us savages."

Adaia shook her head, "I don't care. It's beautiful! I'd go live there right now, if it weren't for the Blight and the Tevinters. Once we've defeated the Archdemon, I think we should rescue as many of our stolen people as we can. We've got loot. We can hire a ship with a trustworthy captain and steal them back from the bastards. We'll free all the slaves we can. Then we'll take them to the eluvian and they can start going through. No one will ever make slaves of us again. The elves have learned their lesson."

Velanna paced restlessly, and burst out in shrill denial. "Let the Blight take the shemlen! The darkspawn were none of our doing! Let them be consumed by the monsters their pride unleashed. Our people will be safe, at least."

Danith was already irritated by her attitude. She saw Ailill rubbing his head and wondered how he had endured her so long. "Like it or not," she said coldly. "We swore oaths as Wardens. I shall keep mine. If you need a more selfish

reason, remember that many elves are in danger from the darkspawn. In order to get them to our new home, we must make the way to it safe. This, I shall do."

She did not particularly like Bronwyn, and Bronwyn would never like her. That did not matter. Her personal honor did that, and the practical need to make travel as safe as possible.

"Of course we must fight the Blight," Lanaya agreed. "It would be a sad and cowardly thing to leave the land of our ancestors to the darkness. However, I see nothing wrong with the old and frail being made safe, and the little ones, too. We who can fight, *will* fight, honoring our ancient treaty."

Velanna made a face, but did not contradict her.

Tara had been thinking along the same lines, but saw some of the difficulties. "We'll need to get the eluvian safely to the homeland. We'll need a team of reliable people to start setting things up. I can't, obviously. I have a duty to the Wardens, just as many of us do. We'll help fight this Blight, we'll rescue those of our people we can, and then we're out of here." She glanced at Zevran, who was smiling, picturing a world without Crows.

"There is also the possibility..." Danith said, more soberly. "...there is the possibility that the war against the darkspawn might go badly. If so, it would be a way for at least some of our people to escape."

The three Wardens Riordan had sent back east made their way to Jader reluctantly, but with obedient speed. The

situation in Lydes had deteriorated in the past few days; the city had rapidly destabilized with the mob of starving refugees inside and outside. The Wardens themselves had been forced to be very persuasive indeed in order to pass through the gates. The elves of Lydes were antagonistic and rebellious; the dwarves were already packing up to go.

It was the latter who first approached the three Grey Wardens. The elderly dwarf in the lead was richly dressed; obviously a community leader. Behind him were a half-dozen younger dwarves. They hailed the Grey Wardens in the main street of Lydes, as they made their way to the East Gate.

"You lot came through only a few days ago," the elderly dwarf asked, his face pasty with fear. "Did you meet the horde? Are the rest of the Wardens dead?"

"No!" Fabrice nearly shouted. "No. We haven't seen the darkspawn yet. Our Senior Warden wants us to contact the Grey Wardens of Ferelden and tell them the situation. We're on our way to the border."

"We just stopped in Lydes to restock our rations," the archer Minjonet told the dwarves, looking down at them from the superior height of her horse. "Not that's there much to be had here."

"Too true," agreed the dwarf.

He and the other dwarves engaged in a whispered debate. Apparently, more wreckage had washed ashore, and there was speculation that the Archdemon was flying out into the Waking Sea and sinking ships that came too close to Val Royeaux. The old dwarf nodded, "Jader it is, then. After that, we'll see."

They were not the only refugees heading east. All along the Imperial Highway the Wardens passed dispirited, wretched people carrying their worldly goods on their backs, in handcarts, on donkeys. The richer among them had wagons and oxen. Some had guards. Smoke rose along the road, and now and then the stripped bodies and the burned-out skeletons of wagons indicated that guards were definitely a good idea. The refugees had attracted a larger than usual number of bandits, out to make all the coin they could from the misfortunes of others.

The blue and silver Warden armor marked the three companions as hard targets. Bandits did not trouble them, since there was richer, weaker prey. The Wardens were careful, nonetheless, and kept a strict watch at night when camping in the countryside. Everywhere, people approached their camp, begging for food, begging for help.

“— Please, messieurs, the bandits took everything...”

“— They took my daughter. I beg you, messieurs, she is only thirteen...”

“— My mother is sick. We cannot move her without the wagon... We cannot leave her alone to die...”

Minjonet muttered, “Aren’t we going to help them? Any of them?”

Clovis always replied, “We have our orders. Wardens’ business comes first. Close your eyes and harden your heart to foolish sentiment.”

One night a band of desperate men tried to steal the horses, and paid dearly for it. The Wardens left the bodies

where they lay and rode on swiftly, not wanting to hear the cries of anguish from the dead men’s women and children.

The first wave of refugees had reached Halamshiral before them: the most easily alarmed, the most prudent, the best prepared. The Wardens took the time to report to the Vicomte and tell him about the bandit infestation on the Imperial Highway. Then they galloped away, ahead of the tide of misery. When they reached Solidor on the eleventh, they discovered that their world had changed.

There was no point in going through Gherlen’s Pass. The Queen of Ferelden and Acting-Warden-Commander of the Grey Wardens was in Jader, which she had claimed for her kingdom.

“Can she *do* that?” Fabrice wondered out loud.

“Apparently she has,” Minjonet replied with a shrug. She had been quiet since the night they had killed the refugees: quiet and dissatisfied. As one of the few female Wardens in Jader, she had taken it into her head that Riordan had sent her back because she was a woman. Clovis thought it might be true. Minjonet was very pretty; very delicate-looking. Her father had been an elf, and she had ended up on her own when her parents died and neither of her parents’ families could tolerate such a being in either of their fine homes. Luckily, she had proved to be a brilliant archer quite young, and so had an alternative to the brothels of Jader. She had knocked at the door of the Warden Compound one day, demanding to Join. Riordan had turned her away seven times before he decided it was Fate.



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"So..." Clovis said. "It's back to Jader. It will be strange, seeing the Fereldans in our Compound."

They were even more surprised to discover that the Wardens were not there at all, but at the Palace.



Bronwyn was out by the archery butts, playing with her new Airbow, when the deputation arrived. Loghain, practicing obsessively, had determined that the weapons had a range only little over half that of a long bow, but were accurate almost to that limit. Or *he* was that accurate. Loghain had the eye of a man who trained all his youth as an archer, and it translated well to the Airbow. Bronwyn was not quite so brilliant, but she could hit a target more often than not, at a better range than she could manage with a shortbow. These were good weapons. A smith had shown them the clever bullet mold that could turn out heaps of lead bullets within an hour. Lead was plentiful and cheap, and it took no skill to mold a bullet, unlike the painstaking art of fletching arrows.

"Your Majesty!" called a guard. "Some Orlesian Grey Wardens are here, wanting to talk to you!"

"Take them to the Wardens' dayroom," she ordered. "I'll meet them there." She shrugged, and said to Loghain, "I'd better see them right away."

Loghain snorted his opinion of that, and loaded his Airbow for another round of target shooting.

With her guards on either hand, she strode quickly through the courtyard and up through the shining cor-



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ridors. The guard beside her threw open the door. Amidst a group of her Wardens were three unknown faces.

"Stay here," she ordered the guards in a low voice, "and don't let anybody else in."

She was dressed for practice, in a white linen shirt under leather jerkin and breeches, but the newcomers seemed to guess who she was readily enough. Perhaps they had heard about her eyes.

"Warden-Commander," said one of them, the big, stocky fellow. "We come from Senior Warden Riordan." His companions looked at him uneasily, not sure what to do. The young woman then sketched a bow, and muttered, "Your Majesty," under her breath. Bronwyn decided that she was the smart one.

"Welcome," she said briskly, and then gestured at the benches. "Take a seat. I am very interested in your news. Might I know your names?"

The big one shuffled. "Clovis, Commander. And these are Fabrice and Minjonet."

"Have you seen the horde?"

"No, Commander. Riordan sent us back to tell you what we have discovered so far."

With that, he launched into his report: the Archdemon's attack on the army, the panic in the cities, the deteriorating situation on the roads, the defiance of the *Sieur de Flambard*.

Bronwyn scoffed at that bit of information. "Doesn't like Wardens, does he? I daresay he'll like darkspawn even less. What word from the Wardens of Montsimnard?"

"We have not seen them, Commander. Based on the information from de Flambard and deserters from the army, we know they came upon the camp after the attack by the Archdemon. They rallied a portion of the surviving troops. Then they headed north toward Val Royeaux. We have seen evil things in the Fade, but we know little. It was Riordan's intention to scout the site of the last camp, and then either go north to Val Royeaux, or northwest to Val Foret."

Bronwyn put a map before him and the Jader Wardens used it to trace their route: the places where they had had the most trouble, and the place where they believed the site of the Archdemon's attack on the army to be.

"Very well." Bronwyn considered their report. The refugees were definitely going to be a problem. Plans must be made to accommodate them, or they would have a starving mob in Jader before another few days had passed. She asked, "Did Riordan have any other messages for me?"

Clovis flushed, embarrassed. Fabrice elbowed him, not wanting to speak himself, not wanting to beg. Minjonet rolled her eyes, exasperated, and then glared at Clovis. Knowing there was no way out of this, the swordsman thought best to lay the matter out plainly.

"Our Senior Warden said that you were to come to our aid. He said that the time for petty quarrels is over, and reminds you of your duty as a Warden."

There was a outburst from Bronwyn's people, who were mightily offended. The outcry rose, louder and louder, alarm-

ing the guards outside the closed door. Bronwyn got to her feet, blazing with indignation. She snarled, "He does, does he?"

Minjonet hissed at Clovis, "He did not put it that way, you fool!" She turned to Bronwyn. "I believe that he thinks that things have gone badly for the Wardens of Montsimnard and he is sure that the Wardens of Val Royeaux are dead. Riordan said that you should recruit as many Wardens as you could and then to come. He asked that you show more mercy than your have been shown, and..." The girl wiped her eyes angrily. "...And so do I. I beg you to help us! So many are suffering. These great lumps here do not seem to care when people beg us to protect them, and we ride away and leave them, but I cannot bear it! The Grey Wardens exist to protect all Thedas!" She crumpled to her knees and her voice broke. "I beg you to come to our aid. Forgive us for our stupid pride and our refusal to help you! Come west with us and fight!"

Looking at each other sheepishly, Clovis and Fabrice knelt beside her, heads lowered.

"Get up," Bronwyn said hoarsely. "Get up. Sit." She pointed at the bench, glaring at them until they sat down like recalcitrant schoolchildren. She walked over to the window, and stood there, looking out but seeing nothing, trying to pull herself together. Alistair came up behind her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Fools," Morrigan sneered.

Leliana was even angrier. "You think she is as bad as you! As bad as the rest of the Wardens, who obeyed the

orders that we were to be left to die!"

"Stop!" Bronwyn said. She turned, and put up a hand for silence. "It's not their fault."

She looked at the Orlesians for a long moment, and then spoke.

"I'm well aware of the contempt in which Orlais has always held Ferelden. I know that we Fereldans are regarded as savages; as unfit to live indoors; as skin-clad barbarians who require the guidance and punishment of their betters. At best, mindless peasants fit only to be exploited. Since the beginning of the Blight, I have been constantly under attack. My family was murdered... a massacre instigated by a malicious Orlesian bard."

Leliana bit her lip and looked away.

"But that," said Bronwyn, "was clearly insufficient to slake the spite of the rulers of Orlais. Attempts have been made on my life, on the life of my husband the King, on my brother, on my friends. Only last month, my dear cousin the Arl of South Reach was viciously murdered in the presence of his wife and children by an Orlesian-trained catspaw. Attack after attack has been lauched at us, and all the while the darkspawn clawed at our lands. Orlais could hardly have done us more harm, had they openly declared an alliance with the darkspawn."

Clovis gasped with protest, but Fabrice nudged him again, this time for silence. They must let the Queen have her say.

"We fought alone against them," said Bronwyn, "for I was informed by the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra and

Antiva that the First Warden had forbidden anyone to come to our assistance. Why? Because, they said, somewhere 'more important' was undoubtedly the real target. Now, no doubt, the First Warden will admire his foresight. However, if we had really hit the darkspawn early, hit them hard with all the power of the Wardens, they might not have had the where-withal to attack Val Royeaux. We'll never know, of course.

"I have my own theories. My sources warned me that the First Warden was surrounded by Orlesians who would gloat at the destruction of Ferelden. Furthermore, it might well suit the First Warden's purposes for such an 'unimportant' nation to be destroyed, as a warning to the rest of the Thedas to pay their tithes promptly."

"Understand me well," she said, her green eyes fixed on the three Wardens. "I don't give this —" she snapped her fingers — for the First Warden. I owe him nothing: not respect, not support, and certainly not obedience. He knew that Alistair and I were raw recruits, who knew *nothing* of the essential elements of Warden lore."

Clovis and Fabrice glanced at each one in shock and alarm. Minjonet's complete attention was on Bronwyn. Bronwyn herself paced restlessly, and went on:

"The First Warden threw us away like a market woman throws away spoiled turnips. Not a word of advice, not a copper coin did he vouchsafe us. My only instructions from him were to report like a good child to Montsimard, leaving my people to be slaughtered and Tainted.



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I ignored him then, and I intend to go on ignoring him. We did all right, at that. While my 'brother and sister' Wardens have scorned their own obligations and played politics, the Dalish, the dwarves, and the mages of the Fereldan Circle have honored the ancient treaties."

"Ready to march, Boss!" cheered Brosca, raising a tankard. She, Sigrun, and Oghren clanked a loud toast together. Bronwyn gave them a nod, smiling.

"I'm calm again. There's no need to beg for mercy. I've been admonished to be merciful by quite a few... people, over the past few months. In fact, what angered me was your assumption that I would be as petty and malicious as nearly everyone else has been to *me*. It *never* occurred to me for a moment... not a *moment*... not to continue the campaign against the Blight. I know that it would be madness to allow the darkspawn to breed undisturbed. And there's another reason."

She stopped pacing, and looked at them rather sadly.

"The only outside help we have received since the beginning of the Blight was from your own Senior Warden Riordan, and his second, Senior Mage Warden Fiona."

At their manifest astonishment, she smiled grimly.

"Yes. Defying orders and danger, and true to their oath as Grey Wardens, they sought us out in secret. *They* told us what we needed to know in order to prosecute the war. *They* helped us Join new recruits. They are the only people in this whole sorry situation to whom I feel I owe *anything*. They are the real



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Grey Wardens: the First Warden and his lackeys are mere hacks. So yes, I'll do everything Riordan asks. I'll recruit, I'll march, I'll find him and I'll fight beside him."



RIORDEN, WARDEN COMMANDER



MAP OF ORLAIS



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CHAPTER 12

PUPPET-
MASTERS
OF FATE

MAKE WAY!" SHOUTED AN
OUTRIDER, CLEARING THE WAY FOR
A CARRIAGE. "Make way! Move
those whores and sheep aside!"

The sheep bleated, and the young women – who would not for the world admit to being whores – swore at him horribly, shaking their fists and making rude gestures. Nonetheless, they scattered, preferring not to be trampled by the six-horse team. A few people jumped up on the stone walls of the Imperial Highway, wanting to peer inside the carriage. Those who did saw three bickering girls.

"Your sewing box is inconveniencing me," Eponine told her younger sister. "Pray move it."

"Forgive me, sister, but there is nowhere else to put it."

The great carriage was crowded once more, as they trundled fast over the road to Jader. Perhaps it was even more crowded than before, since their maids had acquired some luggage of their own.

"Ariette, put the sewing box on the floor," Celandine said firmly to a maid, tired of the noise.

"But..." Eglantine flailed for an excuse. "It might be dirtied."
"No one will look at the bottom," declared the eldest sister, "and the floor is perfectly clean."

The Queen had commanded that they come to Jader. It was very exciting, even though they were not escorted by dear Warden Leliana and gallant Bann Alistair. It felt like going home. Celandine remembered Jader the best, but all of them had memories of lost splendor, and happy recollections of their family all together in the fine family rooms of the Palace Emeraude. It would be delightful to be at a proper Court, even if the monarch were not the Empress of Orlais, but the Queen of Ferelden.

Probably much more delightful, in fact. So far, the Queen had not threatened to kill them.

"Perhaps she will give us official status as her Maids of Honor," mused Eglantine. "That would be very agreeable."

"Perhaps she will give us husbands," Eponine suggested. That was far more to her taste. "And we shall be provided with wedding clothes."

"Perhaps she will proclaim our vocation as cloistered Chantry sisters, and send us to a remote convent in Ferelden," Celandine said gloomily. It seemed to her a very logical way for the Fereldan Queen to dispose of them, while maintaining her reputation for mercy. She hoped that was not what was about to happen, but she had learned that it was best not to hope for much.

"Oh!" Eglantine cried, rather frightened. "She would not,

would she? She had been kind to us so far."

Eponine tried to think sensibly, which was not easy, having had little practice, but she finally said, "I think we would be more useful as rewards given to important men in marriage than as sisters in a convent. More useful to *her*. She does not like the Chantry. Or at least she did not like the Divine, Maker rest her soul."

"That is true," Celandine agreed, gazing moodily at the flat Jader Plain, "but remember it is not all the Queen's decision. Loghain Mac Tir has joined her in Jader, and he is now King. He hates all Orlesians. Perhaps a convent is better than what he would wish for us."

They reached Jader in good time, and were taken directly to the Palace. It was useless for the guards to demand that they keep their heads inside the carriage, for there was simply too much to see. Even the dirty poor people were interesting and picturesque in their own way. The princesses were greeted by the steward of Jader, and by Arl Wulffe, who gave them civil but brisk instructions as to their behavior.

"Your Imperial Highesses. Welcome to Jader. You will be shown to your rooms. Make ready as quickly as you can, because then you'll be taken to make your obeisance to the King and Queen."

"What will they do to us, monseigneur? I pray you, tell us." Eponine pleaded.

"Nothing terrible. Just greet you and show you off, so you might want to smarten yourself up a bit. These officers will show you your rooms. Don't make trouble."

And with these not-so-gallant words, they were led away. They were still princesses, however, and kept their heads high and their shoulders back, because you never knew when a man of good fortune might be looking.

"Smarten ourselves up a bit?" Celandine muttered. "*Createur!* What a figure of speech!"

"Well, there *is* a smudge on your nose," Eponine pointed out. Celandine scrubbed furiously at her face.

"At last we shall meet the Great Loghain," Eglantine murmured. "I would never have expected that!"

Loghain had no doubt that Bronwyn could talk Alistair around into nearly anything. Rather than letting his wife talk the boy into something that might have unpleasant ramifications for his entire life, Loghain decided it was better to have it out honestly with Alistair, man-to-man. He called Alistair to his private room for a talk in which they need not fear an eavesdropper or a pretty woman's disappointed expression.

"Bronwyn thinks you fancy that Orlesian girl," Loghain said abruptly.

Alistair blushed crimson, unable to control his reaction. Loghain saw it, and raised a black brow.

"Well?" he demanded. "Do you fancy her? The youngest one... whatever her name is... I'm told she's pretty."

"They're all pretty," Alistair muttered. "Pretty and golden-haired. Very pretty. They seem nice, too. Not like... I mean..."

"Not much like Arlessa Isolde of wretched memory?"

Loghain asked. "She was pretty and golden-haired, too... at least when Eamon took her as his bride, in the teeth of Maric's disapproval."

"Princess Eglantine isn't anything like Arlessa Isolde," Alistair said. "none of them are. They're very sweet and gentle. They like embroidery and music. They've been threatened with death for years and locked up and had cruel things said to them all the time. People who've had that done to them either become that way themselves or they become as different from that as possible."

Loghain smiled briefly. "And you know this from experience?"

"Maybe..." Alistair bristled, somewhat defiant. "I can't see any of them bullying a servant boy just because they can. They're nice to their maids. The Arlessa was horrible to everybody except Connor and the Arl, and she screamed at him, too, sometimes. She was sickening sweet to Connor, though," he muttered.

Then he shrugged, trying to pretend that the past did not hurt anymore. Truth to tell, he didn't know much about Arl Eamon's family after he had been sent away to the Templars. He had seen the Arlessa a few times with her baby boy before he was cast out. She was always cooing at the pink-faced infant, calling him her '*darling boy*,' her '*sweet child*,' her '*little lord*.' It had hurt horribly, like a dagger in his belly, when he had heard those loving words, the like of which had never been spoken to him.

"So you do fancy the girl," Loghain concluded.

Alistair stared at the floor, feeling mulish. "She's *nice*. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her."

"What would you say to marrying her?"

Alistair was confounded. "*Marry her? Be her husband?*" He shook his head, rapidly, stepping back a little. "I don't think she'd like that. I don't want to force anyone to be married to me. That's like... I don't what, but it sounds bad. And she's an imperial princess," he pointed out. Saying something that Loghain thought was remarkably sensible, Alistair added, "I don't want to marry someone who'd look down on me."

"You are the son of Maric," Loghain said. "That's good enough for anyone."

"I wish my father had thought so," Alistair whispered. Loghain looked at him, pained, and Alistair shrugged again. "I'll talk to her," he promised. "If she can stand it, I can stand it."

"Come on then," Loghain said, shoving him lightly toward the door. "They're here and they must be received. Look them over, and try to talk to them. If you don't like the youngest, you could have one of the others instead." He paused. "And if you don't like any of them, you won't be forced to take one."

"Eglantine's all right," Alistair shrugged, very red. "As long as she doesn't have a problem with *me*."

They were very pretty, Loghain admitted, if you liked that sort of thing: golden-hair, soft skin, big blue eyes, sweet smiles. He brought himself up sharply, remembering a time when he had liked that sort of thing himself.

None of the girls looked a great deal like his first wife Celia, but they were certainly of the same type. He studied them, frowning, which seemed to make them nervous. Either they were brilliant actresses, or they really were not the usual sort of sly Orlesian schemers. The youngest looked at Alistair quite a bit and seemed to like him. For that matter, all the girls seemed to like him. Why not? He was a young and handsome Bann of Ferelden, and a good-natured fellow besides. The girls could do far worse. *Would* do worse, if one of them was bartered to that Duke Prosper in exchange for services rendered.

The Orlesian was standing over there, smirking, looking them over like prime stock. Naturally, he was most interested in the oldest princess, who seemed to Loghain the quietest of the lot: a bit beaten-down, in fact. Not a complete coward, since she met his eyes when she curtseyed with a collected blue gaze. He, however, had plenty of of experience detecting fear. More than her sisters, she was not nervous about making some stupid mistake about court etiquette: she was afraid that he'd say – how did Bronwyn put ? – "Off with her head!"

Bronwyn had arranged the seating so the girl would be beside Duke Prosper tonight. Might as well let her get used to him. What about the middle one, then? They'd have to give it more thought.



Bronwyn did not forgot her resolution to speak to the

hahren of the Jader Alienage. She had a great deal to do before setting out for the west, but she would not neglect this. She sent a group of her Wardens, carefully mixing the races, but under the command of Tara, requiring the presence of the hahren and such of his advisers as he wished to bring with him.

The two informers, now rich beyond the dreams of avarice, had told the other elves plenty about their new Queen. The friendly faces of the Wardens – and the presence of elves among them – reassured the elderly hahren a great deal. They did not hurry him. they chatted pleasantly, as other elves gathered round, excited and curious. The Dalish were asked a number of ignorant, foolish questions, but as they had heard these questions before in Denerim and Gwaren, they were not taken aback, and had answers prepared.

They could tell them that the elven homeland was a fact, and where it was, and that there was a village there, and that other elves were welcome.

"This is our home," the hahren said, overwhelmed by the knowledge. "Some would never want to leave." Unspoken was the fear of forced resettlement. Tara picked up on that at once.

"No one has to go who doesn't want to," she said, more cheerfully than she felt. "It's just an opportunity." Underneath her words, the secret existence of an even grander opportunity lay like a sleeping dragon. Elves were wanted, elves were respected, elves had a home.

That, however, she could not reveal. The elves they had met demanded it. There was to be no pollution of the elven

lands by shemlens, shortening elven lives and draining their magic. The group that had seen the reality for themselves had agreed that the knowledge must be confined to a small group. Marethari must be told, and once elves had come to the temple in the Brecilian Forest, more knowledge could be shared. They would have to make some decisions soon. Someone must convey the eluvian safely back to the elven temple, where it could be kept secret. Merrill wanted to go herself, but could not escape her obligations with the army. Nor could the Wardens. The eluvian would have to wait for now, protected by a locked door and some elaborate barrier spells.

They could not even tell all the other elves in their party. Fenris disliked magic, and had no use whatever for the traditions of the Dalish or the insular society of the city elves. He had few ties to his own race, in fact. He was a warrior, and that largely summed up his outlook on life. He had more in common with other warriors — whether elven, human, or dwarven — than he did with anyone else. He greatly admired Queen Bronwyn. He got on better with Carver, Aveline, Tolver, Emrys, and Alistair than with anyone else. He got on well with Leliana and Ser Silas, for that matter.

They could not safely tell anyone among the Dalish clans or city elves unless they could persuade them to come to the homeland in the Brecilian Forest first. Many would never leave their homes. Tara was baffled by this mindset. Why in the Maker's name would the elves want to stay in this sty of an Alienage anyway? People made themselves

slaves of the familiar. For that matter, there were plenty of mages afraid to leave the Circle. Tara looked about her, face expressionless, at the tall, shabby, crumbling warrens, so very different than the rest of the city. The place stank of old cabbage and stale urine. There was no open sewer, as in Denerim, but refuse was piled everywhere, and drunken elves lounged outside their doors, gawking at the visitors.

They were gawked at outside the Alienage gates, too, as they walked back to the Palace, escorting the nervous hahren and his frightened daughter and son-in-law, as well as two old cronies. People on the streets gathered, speculating on the crimes committed by the "typical shiftier elves," and looking forward to their just punishment. Others commented on the appearance of the female elves, as if they were dumb animals. Tara, at the head of the detail, turned and glared at a pair of such offenders: dirty, stupid brutes with scruffy beards and broken teeth.

"Look at the knife-ears!"

"Prancing around in front like that! Don't that beat all? What do you think she'd charge for a quick one?"

Zevran was already drifting ominously in their direction, but Tara shook her head at him. Her authority must be made clear. Her gaze flicked to Carver: human and male. He was glad to oblige. A mailed fist in a jaw, an elbow in a throat. Two bodies sprawled on the pavement moaning. The onlookers drew back, startled. Carver gave them a challenging stare. Magister barked cheerfully,



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and then pissed on one of the louts.

"Watch how you speak to a Warden," snarled Carver, stepping back. He made a point of saluting Tara. "Senior Warden."

"Thank you, Warden Carver," Tara said formally. "And now, let's move on." She did so herself, her step light and swaggering.



The hahren was clearly terrified to be brought before the throne. Bronwyn sighed to herself, acknowledged Loghain's lifted eyebrows — "What did you expect?" — and let Loghain offer some general words about protecting their loyal elven subjects. She then quietly ordered Tara to take their visitors to the little parlor, where they could speak informally.

It was a rather one-sided conversation at first. Luckily, Tara was there, and could start things off with a list of old grievances, garnered during her visit to the Alienage: dilatory refuse removal, sanctions against elves opening shops of any kind, the constant demands for payoffs and bribes, the shorted wages, the difficulty of arranging marriages and funerals through the Chantry, the casual brutality of the rest of the populace. Once the floodgates opened, the elves had plenty to say.

Her clerk made notes. Bronwyn listened, sickened and weary. *If I were an elf, how I would hate humans.*

Some things could be dealt with immediately. A shop would be authorized in the Alienage, selling foodstuffs and general goods. A city the size of Jader could stand the competition of one small merchant. A proper char-



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ter, noting that the shopkeeper sold by appointment of the Crown, would offer some protection from rapacious guards. The shopkeeper, in turn, could offer employment to some, and piece work to others: spinners, weavers, tailors, shoemakers. The hahren could give her the name of a likely candidate. Very likely the woman he mentioned was already keeping such a shop, only illegally.

Loghain had already spoken to the Captain of the City Guard about certain changes that must be made throughout the city. He had put some of his own men in as auditors. At least it was made clear that outright bribery was illegal and would be punished if discovered, rather than tacitly tolerated as part of a guard's rightful perquisites. To offset this loss of income, the wages of the city guards had been raised.

Bronwyn made up her mind to a long talk with the Revered Mother of that very magnificent Chantry. Doubtless elves were not welcome there. Their weddings took place in the Alienage and their poor funerals outside the city walls. Still, there was no reason why one day a quarter at the Chantry could not be set aside for elven weddings, and why some priest, among the dozens, could not be tasked with the duty of seeing the elves off decently to the Maker's side.



Bronwyn's next conversations were with more exalted individuals. Loghain presumed that she would handle this more sensitively than he could — and he was right — but she still felt uncomfortable with what she had to do.



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For her part, Princess Celandine was uneasy at being summoned for a private audience with the Queen. It was even more distressing that it was held in the room that had been her family's private family parlor, long ago, before her cousin Celene had seized the throne, forced them into flight and hiding, and then had caught them, bringing down her claws like a cat on trembling mice.

The room had changed somewhat, in the years that it had been used by the newly-appointed Marquis of Jader and his family. The portraits were different; her own embroidery no longer hung on the walls; the old bookcase was gone.

A fire crackled cheerfully in the grate, however, and the carved mantelpiece was achingly familiar. Celandine had sat in front of it on her own little stool hundreds of times, learning to sew, playing dolls with her little sisters, singing old songs.

*C'était l'histoire du Sire de Framboisy,
Avait pris femme, la plus belle du pays,
La prit trop jeune, bientôt s'en repentit.
Partit en guerre, afin qu'elle murît.
Revint de guerre après cinq ans et d'mi...*

Tears dazzled in her eyes, breaking up the firelight into hot little jewels. She made a curtsy to the Queen, and stood, awaiting her fate. Bronwyn briefly explained their plans, gave the name of the prospective husband, and some other pertinent details.

"You don't have to agree to this," Bronwyn continued, glancing at the still, white face. "If the idea is repulsive to you, your



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sister, the Princess Eponine, is next in seniority. However, if you do refuse, your situation as eldest and thus heiress-presumptive would call her rights to the throne into question were you to marry and have heirs. You would have to renounce your blood rights, and take vows as a priest."

Celandine knew that Eponine would agree to this plan in an instant. Eponine would be ecstatic, in fact. Eponine was a man-crazy fool.

But was she, Celandine, ready to give up her one chance of marriage, of having children — her greatest desire, of having a reasonably normal life in the sphere into which she had been born? Was it not her duty to accept this — she must admit — very generous and noble offer? Could she not do more good as Empress of even a small, reduced Orlais than as a priest of the chantry?

It took only a moment to make up her mind. She curtsied again.

"I thank Your Majesty for your wise arrangements on my behalf. I would be most willing to wed my noble cousin Duke Prosper at the conclusion of the war, or whenever you deem the proper time."

"Very well. The betrothal will be announced the night before the army marches. I would prefer that you keep this information to yourself until then, though I suppose you will wish to share it with your sisters. That is all."

The girl was dismissed, and said nothing to her sisters as she passed them by. Eponine was ushered in next. She was



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nervous, but not particularly fearful. Celandine had not left in tears, after all. She vaguely recognized the room as part of the family apartments, and looked about with some nostalgia.

"I sent for you to discuss some possible future plans for you," Bronwyn began. "The army will be leaving in a day or two. You and your sisters will remain, and it is extremely important that your conduct be blameless and circumspect. Any shadow cast on your reputations could destroy your future marital prospects."

Eponine, her spirits lifting, made a most beautiful curtsy. "I shall in all ways obey you, Your Majesty."

"It is possible," said Bronwyn, "that any future marriage might take you far away from the land of your birth. Would you find that unbearable?"

"Not at all, Majesty, if it is your will." Eponine did not much care to whom she was married, as long as she *was* married. She left, and the youngest sister entered the room. She had discovered that she did not really remember the Emerald Palace at all, other than by Celandine's description of it, and so studied the old family parlor with curiosity. Perhaps she might have recognized something, had she been placed in the nursery. That, of course, was no longer appropriate.

She was pale and submissive when told of the plan to match her with the new Arl of Jader. When the identity of said Arl was revealed, she was quite transformed: her face pink with joy and relief.

"I should be most happy to wed the noble Arl Alistair!" she



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assured Bronwyn. "Most happy. It is exactly what I would wish!"

"Sit," Bronwyn commanded. When the girl had arranged her skirts, Bronwyn gave her a serious look. "Are you aware that Alistair is the natural son of King Maric?"

Eglantine curtsied, unable to hide her pride in knowing something important. "I am, Majesty."

"As a natural son," Bronwyn continued, "he of course has no right to the throne of Ferelden. However, it is only proper that his birth be recognized and honored, as Maric's sole surviving child. The night before the army marches, Alistair's elevation and your betrothal will be announced. Until then, discuss it only with your sisters. That does not mean that I wish you to include your maids in the discussion."

She had little confidence in the princesses' discretion, and was resigned to leaks. She was quite surprised when Princess Eglantine impulsively knelt and kissed her hand before departing.

As soon as she was gone, Bronwyn rolled her eyes.

"Silly girl..."



Leliana came upstairs to pay a call on the princesses, and found them in the midst of a furious, tearful squabble. Handkerchiefs were thrown, hands were wrung, tea was spilled. No one was happy, except for Eglantine, who was happy but terribly guilty about it. Leliana stepped back, not wishing to find herself in the midst of such a scene, but she listened from behind the draperies all the same, quite fascinated.



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"But what about *me*?" sobbed Eponine. "What about *me*? Am I to be forgotten? Am I to be a prisoner when you go away with your husbands? It is not fair to announce your betrothals while I sit there, shamed and humiliated, like a thing of no value!"

"No one says you are not of value!" Celandine lifted her hands up to the Maker. "You may well make a better match than either of us. My betrothed is old enough to be my father, and has a son younger than me! Why are you angry at us? I advise you to make your complaints to the Queen!"

"I should!" Eponine quavered. "I should do just that! It is so improper for the younger sister to be wed before her elder. I understand why you should be married to Duke Prosper. I understand why you should be declared Empress. You are the eldest – the birthright is yours. But why should Eglantine be married to Bann Alistair? It is not fair!"

"But sister," Eglantine rallied. "You did not think Bann Alistair was high enough in rank to marry! You dismissed him from your consideration. I always liked him."

Eponine wailed, "I like him, too, now that he will rule Jader!"

"Be that as is may," Celandine said. "Eglantine flirted with the gentleman, and you did not. Therefore, he might well have thought you despised him. The Queen is his friend, and very likely asked his opinion. He is to be only an Arl after all. Eglantine will be an Arlessa, which is a horrid word. 'Arlessa Eglantine!' I do not think that sounds well."

"I like it!" Eglantine declared.



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"And she will owe homage to the Fereldan Court, and be the vassal of those lower than she by birth. I do not wish you to be dissatisfied with your lot, Eglantine. If the young man pleases you and you are happy with your choice, then it is you who must live with it, but if Val Royeaux had not fallen, you know that no one would have thought a mere Arl of Ferelden good enough for an Imperial Princess, handsome and gallant as he is."

"He is the son of King Maric!" Eglantine declared proudly. "He is of royal blood!"

That gave her two sisters pause.

"Ah," Celandine considered. "That is true, of course. A son of the left hand, as it were. It is puzzling that he was not publicly acknowledged by the king his father, but such things happen. It is an important consideration. I must say that it makes me feel much better about the marriage."

Eponine sulked. "It makes me feel worse!"

Leliana decided she had listened long enough. She made some noise at the door, and came forth and made her curtsy as if she had heard nothing.

"Your Imperial Highnesses..."

"Warden Leliana!" cried Eponine, looking for sympathy. "Something terrible has happened!"

"Hush, sister!" Celandine blushed. "We are not supposed to speak of it before time."

"But Warden Leliana must know! She is in the Queen's confidence!"



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Leliana dimpled charmingly. She had known nothing until a few moments before, but she had surmised much.

"Is this about your betrothals?"

"Not about *mine!*" Eponine pouted. "But Celandine will be Empress. That is all very proper. She should have been Empress before, but for Cousin Celene and her horrible Shadows. She is to be married to Duke Prosper."

"My felicitations, Highness," Leliana said to Celandine. "The people of Orlais need leaders to care for them."

Celandine could not conceive of herself as anything resembling a leader, but she had always heard that Duke Prosper was brave and cunning. Perhaps that would do. "You are very kind, Warden Leliana."

"And you, Highness," Leliana said to Eglantine, "will be Arlessa of Jader. It will make the change much easier for the people. And Alistair is a very good person."

Eglantine flushed rosily. "I am fortunate, Warden."

Eponine was still sulking. Leliana smiled. "And you, Highness! I am sure that there is some deep plot involving you! Some important foreign alliance to be made, perhaps?"

That had the desired effect. The sulk melted away, replaced by genuine curiosity.

"The Queen did say that my marriage might take me far from my homeland."

"Who could it be, I wonder?" Leliana teased. "There is the Crown Prince of Antiva..."

The squabble became an excited discussion of the cur-



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rent Theodosian dynasties. The princesses, who were sadly behind the times, implored Leliana for the names of every eligible royal known to her.

"Well, the Prince of Starkhaven also has a son of the proper age..."



"Maker!" Aveline groaned. "Once these spears are stuck in something, they're really *stuck!*"

Bronwyn grinned sympathetically. "They do what I asked them to do. I suppose we mustn't grumble."

They used their swords at first, and then their daggers, to carve the pronged spear heads out of the ox carcasses.

It was gruesome and bloody, but the Wardens needed practice with the formidable dragon-hunting spears forged by Master Wade. They were of two types: one was a standard spear, man-height, light but strong, barbed, and wickedly sharp; the other was shorter – the spring-loaded model with leather straps. If you jammed it into your target properly and flicked the catch, heavy prongs unsheathed, driving straight down and to the sides, making the weapon impossible to remove without digging huge holes in a carcass. The leather harness at the end could be fastened around a warrior's waist and the length adjusted, making one far less likely to fall off the back of an angry, fighting dragon. It took quite a bit of work to dislodge these spears, just as now; and then further work to clean them thoroughly and carefully press



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the sharp prongs back into the locking position.

These were the weapons that Bronwyn had ordered from Wade, now some months ago. Jowan had overseen the first prototypes, and they were exactly what Bronwyn had wanted. Killing the dragon Flemeth had taught Bronwyn vital lessons about the hazards inherent in attacking such a creature. Dragon hide was tough and smooth: when bloody it was slick and treacherous. If a dragon took off into the air, the chances of staying on its back were not good: not without an edge like this spear-anchor. It would be a rough ride, but at least they would not be dashed to the ground. And swords and daggers were puny weapons against a dragon. Dwarven axes were better, but forced the warrior to move in very close. The Nevarrans had always used spears, and the long ones forged by Master Wade could both penetrate deeply and slash as well, using the long, barbed head.

Of course, it was unlikely they would have the opportunity to test these weapons before meeting the Archdemon. There was no time to hunt down any wild dragons in the Frostbacks. The closest they could come would be Leopold, Duke Prosper's wyvern, and their new ally would not be pleased if the Wardens, their shape-shifting studies complete, took it into their heads to show up one day to pile on and kill the Orlesian's pet. However, one never knew. Everyone would have some of these spears close at hand. If the Archdemon visited the army, they would be ready.



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Using Leopold's harness as a template, a saddlemaker had been commissioned to make copies that would allow two or three people to ride a wyvern into battle, and to provide saddlebags to carry weapons and bombs. Armor, also, was being forged to protect a wyvern's head, back and breast. It was all very rushed, and not the perfect designs one would wish, but they had little time before they must march.

The three Jader Wardens were doing their part, some more readily than others. They had invited the rest of the Wardens into their spacious compound, where there was plenty of room for weapons-practice and even for fairly discreet shape-shifting. Clovis was senior enough that he could access the supplies for the Joining potion, and Niall and Tara had brewed the base for more of the improved potion.

They had sixteen new recruits who would leave with them. Their Joining could not take place until they had faced darkspawn, survived, and retrieved a vial of darkspawn blood. Some surface dwarves, some Legionnaires, a pair of Dalish elves, two bold elves of Jader, and the rest a miscellany of army veterans seeking adventure along with former subjects of the Orlesian Empire, seeking advancement and the notice of the Queen.

The new Warden recruits were housed in the Warden compound. Astrid, as a Senior Warden, had been put in command of the compound, with her own dwarven Wardens, and Aveline, Toliver, Nuala, Steren, and Oghren to provide a leavening of experience. Petra and Niall were

moved over there to accustom the new recruits to the presence of magic and mages. Adaia and Siofranni were moved over there, too, since there was space for their bomb-making, and thus less chance of blowing off the roof of the Palace. The girls were not pleased to leave their cozy room, and quite openly took most of the furnishings with them to the Compound, setting up a new establishment as comfortable as the old.

Bronwyn liked the compound. It was an excellent place for arms practice, out of range of curious eyes, and extremely well designed and equipped. Clovis had shown her around the place. The servants were here, of course, and suitably deferential. She could sense that they did not like the idea of her pawing through Riordan's private room, but there was of course no reason for her to do so, anyway.

It was quite an old structure, purpose-built from Warden funds, and not simply some unused Palace apartments, which was what the Denerim Warden compound amounted to. It was perfectly independent, and had a far, far better library. A pity they would not be spending more time here. She ran her fingers over the titles, wishing for more time to look at them.

And it had its own stables, too. Some of the recruits had their own mounts, which were sheltered and cared for here by the two grooms left behind. Loghain had put out a call for horses, letting it be known that the Crown of Ferelden would pay well for sound horseflesh. Some of the

horses, Bronwyn hoped, would be sent east for breeding. Ferelden had been short of horses since the Occupation.

The Antivan Wardens made good time in their fleet of five ships. The fleet put in at Ostwick, and then at Highever for fresh water. At Highever, four passengers – who were *not* Wardens – left the ship. In the bustling chaos of rebuilding Highever, they asked some questions of the locals. They then headed west on the North Road toward West Hill, where they were told Arl Nathaniel Howe was leading his men in support of the King. Quiet and professional, they did nothing to attract attention to themselves.

It was no great distance to the fortress of West Hill. If it was being improved and refurbished, surely it was in need of more servants. Two of the party had succeeded previously with that ploy, and it was unlikely that anyone in young Howe's retinue would recognize them.

The mages rode out to Galehaut again, and studied Leopold at greater length. Jowan was instructed to leave Lily behind, as the dog might find the day bewildering and frightening. This time Velanna joined them. The Dalish elf was quite interested in this form of magic, but had not had time previously to study with Morrigan. She learned quickly, however; not failing to claim that shape-shifting had been an invention of the ancient elves, stolen from them by the thieving shemlen.

Once Anders mastered the change, however, they had to take the lessons elsewhere, for Leopold was growing more and more puzzled and excited by the smell of other wyverns, and more and more determined to break free and meet them. Morrigan, to be sure, had been bold enough to change in the stable and make the wyvern's acquaintance in her new form. Perhaps Leopold had never really seen one of his own kind before. The meeting could have gone very badly, but did not. Leopold was too curious to challenge her, and in fact, as long as this beautiful female did not attempt to steal his meat, he was quite content to have a visitor.

"I am not so sure how he will react to another male, however," Morrigan told her students. They took themselves downwind of the wyvern, and out of sight.

It was not simply a matter of making themselves take the form of a powerful creature. They needed to learn how to move in this form, to fight, to leap, to evade pursuit. Tara, so magically talented otherwise, was the last to succeed in making the change.

"Are you distracted?" Morrigan asked, frowning. "I do not understand why you find this difficult."

"I wasn't around animals until I left the Circle!" Tara protested. "They smell funny!"

Velanna huffed scornfully, which made Tara want to punch her. Even more annoying, Velanna managed to shape-shift immediately after Anders, shifted back and forth to show off, and was now already considering out

loud which other animals would be useful.

"Birds are excellent for scouting, and foxes are clever and elusive..."

"Something that's not prey, obviously," muttered Jowan. He thought he might be able to take shape as a mabari, once he mastered the trick of it completely. A mabari would be good. Few animals would attack one, and no human would kill them on sight. No indeed: anyone who saw a mabari was more likely to want to keep it. And no one would be surprised by a smart mabari. It would be a very good animal if one wanted to spy. His next attempt to shape-shift was a bizarre combination of dog and wyvern.

"Concentrate!" Morrigan scolded him. "What a pack of children!"

Petra was dutifully concentrating: sprouting odd quills and claws, then abruptly manifesting as a wyvern. Since she was standing too close to Anders and Niall, she knocked them down, and stumbled, sprawling. Her clumsily swishing tail thudded against a tree.

"Everyone back!" shouted Morrigan. She shifted herself and set about training Petra into how to move in her new form, showing her how to manage four feet, two wings, and a tail. Watching her was even more useful to the mages than her earlier exercises.

Petra was instructed to run, to walk, to leap, to flex her wings, to glide. She was occupied for some time doing that. Velanna could not resist showing how much better she was at it, and kept getting in Petra's way, until a ferocious, snarling



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Morrigan-wyvern faced her down and made her back off.

They broke off for a hearty meal. The food improved their performance. Jowan and Niall finally succeeded, though they were awkward in their new forms. Morrigan made everyone practice shifting and shifting back, again and again.

Tara watched them until something finally clicked into place in her brain. Apparently, the magic of shape-shifting had nothing to do with relative size. The resulting wyvern was very impressive. Velanna's bristling quills drooped submissively.



Hector Pentaghast and the Wardens of Nevarra first made contact with the darkspawn on the twelfth of Drakonis. There had been no resistance from the remnant of the Orlesian army at the border. Other than a handful of guards, there were no Orlesian troops to be found. The Wardens had been welcomed in, and had passed by the swelling refugee camp outside of Val Chevin. The worthy Revered Mother had approached them for food as soon as they were in sight. Pentaghast saw no reason to offend her; not when more Wardens and more supplies were coming in their wake. He was not overly generous, however, and required news before distributing the goods.

The Templar in command, an attractive young woman, approached him for news in her turn.

"People need to know where they can go to be safe," she said. "We don't know what to tell them. They can't stay here forever."



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"I know less than you about the darkspawn attacks. I can tell you that more Wardens are coming from the north. It could be that taking the road northeast to Cumberland or northwest toward Montfort might be the thing to do."

Val Chevin had not fallen, but its southern fields were exposed to darkspawn raids. There was a great deal of hysteria and rumor, and the people they questioned were not as level-headed as the priest at the camp. Nonetheless, they were beginning to get a good picture of what was happening. No Grey Wardens had been seen or heard from moving north from Val Royeaux. That was grim tidings in itself.

In a heavy mist, they left Val Chevin. Not three hours later they came to a fertile field where it appeared that men were sowing grain, bent to their task. As they drew nearer, they realized that the stooped figures were not putting anything into the ground. They were looting and defiling corpses. And there was an odd rasping sensation.

"Darkspawn!" shouted a scout.

In a flash, the darkspawn charged them, gobbling and mouthing. Pentaghast's horse reared, screaming in protest. He leaped down and tossed the reins to a youngster.

"Horses to the rear! They are of no use here! Archers! Give them a volley!"

Every Nevarran Grey Warden had slain his darkspawn in order to qualify for the Joining. There was a great difference, however, between a handful of darkspawn, in the shadows of the Deep Roads, and a full company of

them, loping toward them under the sun. It felt horribly... wrong. A storm of arrows hissed down, taking darkspawn with them. A few: too few. In a moment, the Grey Wardens were engaged, and fighting for their lives.

The twelfth of Drakonis was the last date that former Orlesian subjects could do homage in order to keep their lands. Well-dressed people trickled into Jader, those so indecisive or slothful as to wait for the very last moment. They had kept Loghain and Bronwyn waiting, and so they were made to wait in their turn. Some had sworn to defy the Fereldan Dog Lords to their last breath, but the looming threat of dispossession, poverty, the darkspawn menace, the lack of any credible allies, and the danger to family still in Jader made them amenable at last.

One anxious, middle-aged woman, Madame de Danancy, told them about a neighbor, an aged gentlewoman too old and bed-ridden to come to Court. Her sons were dead, one daughter was in the Chantry in Lydes, and her only grandchild was in the Orlesian army. The woman had been uneasy leaving the old lady alone herself, and asked if some exception might be made for her. Loghain detailed an officer and his company to check out the story. If true, mercy might be shown the old woman. Bronwyn flicked him a glance. Loghain sighed. Madame de Danancy paid her homage, presented quite a nice gift of fine wool, received her writ, and was sent her way, accompanied by the soldiers.

Once the ceremony was complete, it was time to sit down with the map of Jader and the territories they now claimed within their borders, marking down those manors and demesnes which had not submitted. They would be investigated, and unless there was some extraordinary reason, the lands would be forfeited to the Crown, to be granted to someone more loyal.

The very next day, Cauthrien set out to pay some visits, commanding a company of Maric's Shield. The royal holdings increased significantly.

They would hold a last court, a last feast, before the army moved west. There was time to visit the brothels, for those whose tastes ran in that direction. There was time for a solemn service in the Chantry, for others. Bronwyn and Loghain attended, of course, since it would be foolish to scandalize the devout among their new subjects. The conversation with the Revered Mother had not gone too badly. Borders shifted, and the Chantry occasionally had to accept that their allegiance would henceforth be owed elsewhere.

It was not mentioned between either woman that both the Queen of Ferelden and Grand Cleric had been declared anathema by edict of Divine Beatrix V, and been burnt in effigy in front of the Grand Cathedral. The news had of course come to the Revered Mother's ears. However, given the fact that the Maker's displeasure had fallen rather heavily on Val Royeaux just subsequent to that event, and given that no one knew if the Divine was alive or dead, it was prudent to accept that the

wind was now blowing from the east.

The service was quite lovely, and the royal pew was luxuriously cushioned. The choir was disciplined and professional, and the incense of the highest quality. The princesses attended the ceremony with them, and very much enjoyed the outing.

When they returned to the palace, Bronwyn showed Loghain her sketches of a new Ferelden cathedral.

"What's this?" he grunted, squinting at the elevations. "Denerim already has a cathedral."

"Denerim has a pokey old shed that's not fit for a village of goatherds," Bronwyn declared. "I know that we've ten places to put every penny, but if we want foreigners to take us seriously, we have to spend some money making Denerim look better. See — I've put it on the south side of town —"

"I see, I see," he waved at her irritably.

Bronwyn was not to be dismissed like a servant. "No, you don't see. I want you to look at this. It's very important. If foreigners couldn't sneer at us, they wouldn't have been quite so quick to leave us to our fate. Everything we're hearing indicates that the world is rushing to Orlais because Val Royeaux has been destroyed. Do you think they would have done as much for Denerim? I say we use some of the windfall from our seizure of this territory to make us appear to the world the way we know ourselves to be in our hearts. Now look at this!"

He glared at her, but sat at the table and took a closer

look at the drawings. "Marble staircases, I suppose."

"Why not? For the Palace, too. And marble floors."

He muffled a groan. Bronwyn was not done.

"Maybe some greenstone pillars... but we can loot some of those from the quarries here."

He brightened at that idea. "It's not looting if we own it!"

There was quite a bit of cheering at that last feast. Quite a bit of drinking, too. Toasts were made to the King and Queen; to the dwarves, to the elves, to the Wardens; to all the members of the Alliance, who would set forth on the morrow. The Orlesians were quite thrilled at the announcement of the betrothal of the Imperial Princess Celandine to Duke Prosper de Montfort. It was also made clear by Loghain that Princess Celandine's rights as heir to the throne of Orlais would be honored and supported by her Fereldan allies.

"Long life to the Empress-elect!" shouted one drunken nobleman. The cry was taken up. "*Vive l'Impératrice Celandine!*"

These words were not well understood by others in the hall. Corbus scowled. "I didn't vote for her," he muttered.

Wulffe, sitting next to him, leaned over to explain. "It means she's the rightful empress, but hasn't been crowned yet and hasn't started ruling. Personally, I think that we should have gone ahead and had some sort of coronation for her, but Bronwyn thought it would be better to wait so it can be performed in Orlais, and make the Orlesians

pay for it. The girl will make a good figurehead for the Orlesians marching with us, and an even better one as we move through Orlais. The Duke's coming with us, of course. We can say we're traveling through Orlais by the authority of Empress Celandine. She'll stay here, of course, well guarded with her sisters. The smiths have forged a royal seal for her. Pretty thing. Loghain's taking that along, of course. The Orlesians can make up some banners with a golden celandine flower on them if they like."

"I sort of see," Corbus admitted. "That way it doesn't look like we're conquering the whole country, but helping them out."

"Right you are."

"Good thing that we've got ourselves a credible puppet," Loghain grunted to Bronwyn, his voice low as his cold eyes swept the crowd. "Someone else might try to steal a march on us. There's no one with a better claim than the girl, unless it's that Florestan fellow, but he's likely darkspawn meat by now. You never know, though. We'll have to keep our ears open."

The next declaration, that Alistair FitzMaric was the new Arl of Jader, was received politely by the Jaderians, who did not really know him except as a handsome and modest young man. The Fereldans were pleased and the Wardens overjoyed. The Orlesian response warmed a great deal when his betrothal to Princess Eglantine was announced, and the information circulated quietly of his royal – if irregular – birth. The new subjects seemed to

think that they had done well.

More importantly, the alliance with the Orlesian volunteers was strengthened by these evidences of chivalry and respect for the ancient line of Kordilius Drakon. Most of the credit went to Bronwyn, which was not quite fair, but Loghain was perfectly fine with everyone believing her to be the tenderhearted counter to his own Fereldan barbarism. Then, too, it was noticed that the young couple seemed pleased. The attention of the unattached nobles shifted entirely to Eponine, who rather enjoyed it.

In the bustle in between dances, Morrigan accosted Bronwyn, wanting a word.

Her voice low and her yellow eyes brilliant, Morrigan whispered, "Have you taken proper precautions, now that your Hero has returned to you?"

"I don't quite know –" Bronwyn paused. She did know. "You mean Herb of Grace –"

"Properly speaking, I mean silphium tea. Have you been partaking of it every evening? The coming march will not be any easier than our ventures in the Deep Roads. You cannot risk yourself needlessly."

"It is kind of you to think of me," Bronwyn said warmly. "Very kind. No, I confess I have nothing of the sort about me."

"Do not accuse me of any such muddleheadedness. 'Tis simply practical. I shall bring a cup to your room. Drink it at once. If Loghain insists on tasting it first, 'twill do him no harm." She shrugged, with a smirk. "No good either.



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And it tastes quite terrible.”

True to her word, once the ball was over and the exhausted merrymakers gone, Morrigan, dressed in an elaborately embroidered dressing gown, appeared at the door of the Queen’s apartments. Sneering at the admiring guards, she rapped smartly, and a wide-eyed maid opened the door.

“I have brought the Queen her tea,” she declared, much as a champion might present the head of a sworn foe to her liege lady.

Loghain, hearing her voice, opened an inner door. He frowned at the sight of her, that being his default reaction to all sorts of unexpected events, but Morrigan was quite unimpressed, and merely raised her brows at him.

“It’s all right,” Bronwyn said, emerging from the bedchamber, clad only in a fragile nightdress. She took the painted cup from Morrigan’s hands, and sniffed gingerly at the acrid steam.

“You should drink it at *once*,” Morrigan demanded.

“Maker! Too hot!” Bronwyn laughed. “Good night, Morrigan. I do appreciate it. I’ll gulp it down as quickly as I can. I daresay it won’t be so awful that way.”

Morrigan stalked away, eyes gleaming. her point gained. Bronwyn would have that tea every night. It was better for her, anyway: safer. The miscarriage was a distressing event that ought not to be repeated. Above all, there must not be more than one pregnant woman present when the Archdemon was slain.



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Bronwyn brought the cup back to the bedchamber and set it on the bedside table. The maids were evicted from the room and the door shut firmly after them.

“What’s *that*?” asked Loghain, grimacing at the smell emanating from the dainty cup, painted with butterflies.

“Morrigan is trying to take care of me,” Bronwyn told him, with a laugh. “It’s very kind of her. I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but of course I’m not going to drink a contraceptive tea. It’s quite improper for a Queen of Ferelden.”

The dogs came over to sniff, too. Amber’s nose twitched. Scout whuffed with distaste. It smelled like poison. It *was* poison. Human females drank it sometimes, though. Humans ate and drank all sorts of repulsive things.

Loghain thought a moment, wondering if it wasn’t a good idea after all. The upcoming campaign promised to be rough. He opened his mouth, and then thought better of it. This was a woman’s choice, and Bronwyn must make it for herself.

She opened the window, and carefully poured the contents down the sleek and shining greenstone wall.

“So much for that,” she said. “And now, why don’t we do some celebrating ourselves? Who knows when we’ll next enjoy such a comfortable bed?”



Her dreams were streaked with crimson. Muffled shouts and screams surrounded her, punctuated by the whistle of arrows and the clash of swords. It was a night without stars, for the smoke of battle hid the Maker’s heaven from the earth.

Darkspawn surrounded her, buffeted against her: noisome, reeking, carrying torches. Above her was a stone wall, bristling with weapons. A tall man whose blood sang of "Warden," shouted orders. A great cauldron tipped forward, and out of poured something dark, viscous, and vile. The boiling oil splashed the darkspawn in the lead, whose torches touched the oil off into an inferno. The darkspawn became torches themselves, burning, burning. Oil streamed back in blazing rivulets. Darkspawn slipped and fell into the oil. They thrashed, screeching, as their skin blistered and roasted. More arrows whistled past.

A burst of hot violet flame erupted out of the smoke. The Archdemon roared just over her head, flying low, loosing another blast of flame as it neared the wall. Some stones tumbled, but the wall was strong, and the Archdemon soared up, up, its belly exposed to the defenders there. Strange missiles hurtled toward the Archdemon, each with a pair of weights tumbling apart. They were nets; and one tangled onto the Archdemon outstretched left wing, fouling it.

The beast bellowed, faltering, fluttering. Its horned head snaked back and its teeth tore at the offending net, ripping it away. It lost altitude. Slowed as it was, the archers at the top of the wall loosed a storm of fire arrows, dotting the Archdemon with spurts of flame. More nets were launched, and one of them struck the creature, the heavy weights slamming hard into its skull. More arrows volleyed. A lucky shot struck just under the right eyesocket, and the arrow lodged there. The Archdemon

shrieked again, dazed, and then fought free. It wheeled away and plunged back into the darkness, leaving its minions to burn.

"Bronwyn!"

She moaned, and pushed away the coverlet, feeling smothered. Loghain was beside her, and his arms felt much better. Faint dark green light filtered through the bed curtains.

"I'm awake."

"A bad dream?"

"A good one, actually. I think someone took the Archdemon down a notch. Wardens were fighting it and chased it off. A city or a fortress somewhere. I didn't recognize anyone."

He lay back, and pulled her close, her head resting on his shoulder.

"If the Archdemon were killed, would you know it?"

"Absolutely."

He thought about that for awhile. The Nevarrans almost certainly had reached the Orlesian border. The Wardens Bronwyn had seen were either Orlesian or Nevarran. Good luck to them in killing the beast. For a moment, he almost proposed leaving them to do it, but knew Bronwyn would never agree. She had no confidence in her fellow Wardens at all.

And then, there was the sheer adventure of it. Tomorrow they would set forth, into the land of the ancient enemy, this time making them dance to a Fereldan tune. Being a puppetmaster was a great deal more satisfying than being a puppet himself.

CHAPTER 13

V FOR VENDETTA



RIGINALLY, NATHANIEL HAD THOUGHT IT LIKELY THAT THE FORTRESS OF WEST HILL WOULD NEED TO WITHSTAND A MAJOR

ORLESIAN ASSAULT. As it had fallen out, the worst they faced was a handful of half-drowned chevaliers, the few survivors of the destroyed Orlesian fleet. Wreckage washed up all along the southern shore of the Waking Sea from Jader to Kilda. One poor fellow had actually clung to a capsized boat for days. The news of the further disaster in Val Royeaux broke his heart, and he died soon after.

That still left the rest. They were entirely dependent on his charity, since they had lost everything: armor, weapons, horses, boots, coin. Those who had burdened themselves with their possessions had been killed by them. The common folk along the coast were out in force, looting the bloated corpses, sifting through trunks, catching the odd horse. Nathaniel did not begrudge the poor their plunder: these were exactly the same people who would have been despoiled and slaughtered had the Orlesians successfully made landfall.

As to the survivors, he saw little point in holding them for ransom, and was inclined to send them to Jader and let Bronwyn sort them out. News had reached him of the taking of the city, and it had been celebrated at some length. It was also known that Celene's cousins and heirs had fallen into Fereldan hands.

"That is interesting, my darling," remarked Callista, when he told her the news. "It would be a very sensible thing to give one of the princesses in marriage to my cousin Tylus. One of the younger ones, of course. Perhaps that would be a way for a peaceful settlement of the war between Orlais and Nevarra, once this terrible Blight is over."

Nathaniel thought she was making good sense, even though he was hardly objective about his new bride. They had only been married two months, and they had been the happiest two months of his life. That said, marriages were, as he knew well, a traditional way of creating alliances and promoting good will. A marriage might indeed be a way of ending the hostilities between Orlais and Nevarra — at least for a generation or two.

If that was what was in Ferelden's best interests. Was it? The last thing Loghain would want would be Orlais and Nevarra united against Ferelden. It was true, though, that Orlais would likely be savaged by this latest phase of the Blight. And Nevarra had absolutely no reason to attack Ferelden, or to want Orlais to possess Ferelden. It really might not be a bad idea.

"Your cousin isn't betrothed elsewhere?"



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"Not anymore. The girl died last year, and my uncle is looking about for someone suitable. A pity your Queen did not have a younger sister."

"I'll write to the King and Queen, my love. They may not know that Prince Tylus is available."

Callista smiled, and returned to her book. She liked to sit with him in his rather ramshackle office here in this rather ramshackle fortress while he completed the ridiculous amounts of necessary paperwork.

Nathaniel liked it too, though it was disappointing to be so far from the action. He would include a plea to be permitted to come west with them in the letter as well.

It seemed unlikely that all of Loghain's improvements along the coast would be needed. No one could predict the future, so he did not consider the coin spent to be wasted. Certainly all the improvements he was overseeing here in West Hill were long overdue.

There was a knock at the door.

"Supper, my lord."

"Enter."

A pair of menservants entered, bearing covered dishes from the kitchens. The cooks here were not bad. Nathaniel and Callista had a pleasant custom of having their late supper together and alone, away from the mob of soldiers and engineers. The meal was arranged, and the menservants stood behind the two chairs, with punctilious ceremony.

"Supper is served, my lord and lady," said the shorter one.



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The big one said, "The cook made dumplings, just like you wanted, my lady."

"Oh! How nice!" Callista laughed. "I shall bring some of Navarra to Ferelden, if only in the form of dumplings!"

"Fine with me," Nathaniel agreed absently, still intent on his letter. He gestured the servants away. "We'll summon you when we want the dishes removed."

The servants glanced at each other, faintly annoyed.

"You are sure you wouldn't like us to serve the soup, my lord?"

"I can serve it," Callista said. She looked up from her book. "I'll wait until you're done, my lord."

"As you wish, my lady," Nathaniel said. "I need to finish this letter while the ideas are clear in my mind."

She gave him a sweet smile, guessing his thoughts. He called her "my lady" in front of the servants. Perhaps it was silly and old-fashioned, but it seemed undignified and uncouth to reveal so much of his feelings as to call her by the names he used when alone with her. Nor was it respectful to call her by her first name except when alone or among equals. She knew what he meant when he said "my lady," and that was what mattered.

His parchment fluttered, caught in a draught. The shutters had not been closed properly, and a sharp breeze blew threw the crack. Annoying. The shutters should be closed after sunset, when the wind turned and it grew cool. He was too busy with his letter to get up.

Then he noticed that the servants had not yet left the room.



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"You are dismissed."

"Yes, my lord," said the big one. "Perhaps I might close the shutters for you first."

"Do it, and then go."

The shorter fellow was smiling at Callista, standing a bit too close to her. Nathaniel frowned, and the tip of his quill broke. Even more annoyed, he took up his penknife to mend it.

The tall fellow was fumbling with the shutters. Did he not know what he was doing? Nathaniel took another look, and then realized he had never seen either of those servants before.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"Yes, my lord," the short fellow said, beaming. "Just taken on. And a splendid opportunity, if I may be so bold as to say it."

Nathaniel later could not have said just what about the men made him uneasy. He had had too many close calls in the Free Marches not to trust his instincts.

"Since you're here," he said to the short servant. "Go ahead and start serving."

The fellow bowed obsequiously, smirked, and set out ladling out the rich, creamy shieldfin soup.

"My lady," Nathaniel said casually to Callista. "If you would have a look at this letter, I'd be obliged." He wanted her behind the desk, whatever happened.

"Of course, my da – lord."

She rose lithely, and was beside him in a moment, discreetly pressing against him. He touched her hand, and whispered "Stay here," on a thread of breath.



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Without warning, the big fellow slammed into him from the side, wrapping a huge arm around Nathaniel's throat. Callista fell to the floor with a cry, and the short man tossed aside the ladle, drawing a dagger. He vaulted over the dining table, scattering goblets and sweetmeats over the stone floor.

His attacker was strong, but obviously considered Nathaniel to be some soft-headed noble, unable to protect himself. Nathaniel shifted his grip on the penknife, struck backwards, and drove the sharp little blade directly into the side of the assassin's neck. Then he jerked it sideways.

The big fellow staggered back, howling. Nathaniel elbowed him away, grabbed up the heavy inkwell with his left hand and used it to parry the shorter man's dagger. He dropped the pen knife, and his belt knife was in his hand in a split-second. Callista was staying down, bless her. The big man was down, too, bright arterial blood bubbling through this hand.

The shutters rattled, and another man burst through the window and dropped to the floor. Nathaniel swore, and kicked his chair in the man's path, tripping him up. He grabbed his short attacker's wrist, yanked him close and drove his blade into his belly. A shocked squeal answered him. Then he turned to engaged the third man, who unfortunately had a sword.

"Callista! Run!" he shouted. He moved in close to spoil the swordsman's advantage, and kned him hard. The man grunted, but was unfortunately wearing armor there. The



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assassin kicked high, jamming his boot into Nathaniel's chest, shoving him back, off-balance. He lifted his sword for a cut—

And was drenched with hot shieldfin soup. Callista trembled for a moment, and then hit him with the tureen, too.



At Nathaniel's orders, the guards quickly and quietly rounded up all the newer servants. During their search, they found a young woman lurking behind the stables, holding the reins of four horses.

"She was the one in charge of their escape, my lord," a captain told Nathaniel. "A new dairymaid. Nice as you please, currying favor with the housekeeper. Quick with a knife, though. Cut up a few of the boys before they brought her down. Cunning lot. They didn't all come together. Two and two. The girl and the fellow with the sword claimed to be brother and sister from Kirkwall. The two dead men arrived later, with a recommendation from Bann Alfstanna. Forged, of course, but who would know to check?"

Nathaniel hoped the swordsman would live. He had ingested some of the spilled soup, and was puking up his guts now. The Healers assigned to West Hill assured Nathaniel that the man would live, but only *wished* he were dead. The soup had been laced with a very nasty poison indeed. From the description of what it would have done, Nathaniel guessed that it was what was used on his brother Thomas.

The dead men and the prisoners had been searched thoroughly, and were quite obviously Crows from the discreet



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tattoos and certain other aspects of their gear. Nathaniel had spent eight years in the Free Marches, after all, and knew quite a bit about the Crows. Since the Crows had killed his father, brother, and sister, he had learned ever more.

The message left on the scene by his family's murderers had left no doubt of the perpetrators or their patron.

"Blood will have blood. Nemo me impune lacessit."

Nathaniel listened to the captain's report, and nodded. There was no reason to waste time.

"Let's have a talk with our feathered friends."

He resented every moment that he must spend on this filth. He should be with Callista, calming and comforting her, and telling how splendid she'd been. Instead, he would have to drag out every bit of useful information from foreign assassins. He had not realized that the Crows operated in Ferelden. Perhaps they had not, until his father had made a point of angering a powerful Antivan.

The girl was young, but she knew what to expect. She had a face that would have been pretty, had it not been old and hard before its time. She also had ridged scars on her arms from knife fights. In the corner of the cell, the swordsman lay in a heap, pale and sweaty, but no longer vomiting.

"Talk," Nathaniel ordered, without preamble.

The girl spat on the straw of the cell floor. A guard cuffed her hard.

"Suit yourself," Nathaniel said. "Your lives are already forfeit. You, girl, are a horse thief, and that's a hanging offense.

You," he said to the swordsman, "tried to assassinate me. Since you were conspiring together – and don't try to pretend you weren't – you are both guilty of petty treason, as I am in command of this fortress. The penalty for that is drawing and quartering. That could mean a very long and unpleasant last day for you. I suggest you talk now, and convince me that you only deserve a quick, clean hanging."

"What do you want to know?" the man shrugged. "You must know we are Crows. If you kill us, others will come, and then others after them, until the contract is fulfilled."

"Who took out this contract on me?"

The girl sneered at him. The man said, with honest surprise, "It is nothing new. It is the old contract. Signora Livia Fortuny discovered that it had not been fulfilled, as you were alive. The contract is on the Howe family. Signora Fortuny declared vendetta against you all. The Crows honor their obligations."

"By killing my wife? She's only a Howe by marriage!"

The girl rolled her eyes. The man gave Nathaniel a sickly smile. "If I may point it out to you, Arl Howe, Signorina Oriana Fortuny was only a *Cousland* by marriage. It did not save her from your father."

After some consideration, Nathaniel ordered the prisoners to be put in separate cells, where communication was impossible. Unpleasant as the prospect was, he would need to gather every bit of information he could from these assassins. Then he would need to do some hard bargaining

with people who had little reason to show him mercy.

Two days, two excruciating interrogations, and two executions later, Nathaniel had a plan. He hired some reliable agents, who put him touch with more. Their job was to go to Antiva and rout out every bit of information available about House Fortuny. Nathaniel knew quite a bit, but it needed to be kept up-to-date. It was also necessary to expose this very nasty threat. Callista wrote to her aunt and cousins in Nevarra. Nathaniel wrote to Loghain and to Anora. And then he wrote another letter, to be sent by diplomatic channels to Antiva.

Nathaniel Howe, Arl of Amaranthine, greets Livia Fortuny, Matriarch of House Fortuny.

Honored Signora:

I am unable to accept the present which you in your generosity wished to bestow upon me. Those charged with the delivery have been rewarded as I deemed appropriate. Do not attempt this again.

My father, Rendon Howe, was guilty of many things, but he was alone in his guilt. What he did, he paid for with his life. My innocent brother and sister paid as well. Three of mine for two of yours. Let their blood suffice. I have made my peace with the Couslands, whose grievance is far greater than yours, but who have risen above it.

I will let pass the recent attempt on my life, but I am less inclined to forgive the insult to my lady wife, Arlessa Callista Pentaghast Howe, the niece of Queen Melantha of Nevarra.

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You will agree, I think, that however much you may despise the nobility of Ferelden, an attack on the royal house of Van Markham and the noble and formidable Pentaghasts could have consequences unpleasant to you and yours. A letter even now is on its way to Nevarra, expressing dismay at the conduct of those who interfere with soldiers who are engaged in the campaign against the Blight.

Let me make myself yet more clear: I am no stranger to the northern reaches of Thedas. I have friends and servants there yet. Any further attempts to harm the Howes will be met by a disproportionate response against the Fortunys. You have children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins. I know their names and where they live. If by some chance you were to succeed in your designs against me, I have made arrangements for the complete annihilation of your House.

Withdraw your contract with the Crows.

Think well on this letter, Honored Signora. It would be best if it were the last communication of any kind between us.

Respectfully,

Nathaniel Howe

Travel was certainly a dirty business. The distance between the Circle and Denerim seemed infinite and unbearable. Enchanter Finn had spent the last few days stowed like a bag of bad oats in a creaking, jolting wagon. He slept, mostly, since he discovered that trying to read in a moving wagon disturbed his digestion.

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"Out!" rumbled Ser Clancy, one of his Templar guards. "We're here!"

"Here?" Finn roused himself cautiously, rubbing the agonizing crick in his neck. And his robes were *rumpled*. "Of course we're 'here,'" he muttered. "Where else could we be? The question is where 'here' is."

He clambered awkwardly out of the wagon, and found himself in front of Denerim Cathedral.

"Oh."

It was raining. Not a heavy rain, to be sure, but enough to draw up one's hood and think of hot soup. Ser Clancy pointed his gauntleted hand. "That's where you're supposed to be." Another Templar reached into the wagon and retrieved Finn's lumpy duffel bag. He shoved it into Finn's arms, knocking the breath out of him.

"Move along, now."

Ser Clancy was still pointing, waiting for him to obey. It was never wise to keep Templars waiting. Too many muscles.

"Er, nice traveling with you, too."

He walked toward the house pointed to by the Templar and smiled back at them a little weakly. He avoided a puddle, unhappy at the prospect of mud on his boots. The Templars kept staring at him, obviously expecting him to make a mad dash for freedom. Finn held his head high, and entered the house indicated. He wiped his boots diligently on the little mat provided.

"And who are you?" asked a Chantry sister seated at the



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table inside

"Florian Phineas Horatio Aldebrant, Esquire. At your service."

Sister Ursula stared at the young man, baffled. Then she said slowly, "Oh! You're that *mage*..."

"I am indeed. Could I come in? It's raining, you see, and my boots are getting unpleasantly damp. Oh, look, there's a stain on my robe. Might I have a cup of tea? I'm a bit chilled."

"Yes, of course. Wait here, while I tell Bethany you've arrived." She rose and went through the inner doorway. Finn peered through and saw blue light: a mage at work healing. This must be the right place. The Fereldan Free Clinic.

It was dreadfully small compared to Kinloch Hold, and it seemed very untidy to Finn. The fine carpet was thick with muddy footprints. There were too many people crowded the waiting room: dirty people in dirty clothes who smelled... well... *dirty*. There was a small child scampering about, its nose running. It made a dash at Finn and attempted put unclean hands upon his pristine robes.

"Don't do that," Finn warned, twitching his robes away.

"Mamma!" the infant terror roared.

The mother, peacefully resting on the bench, eyes closed, murmured, "Don't mind him, ser. He'll settle down soon. Come here, sweeting. Mamma will give you a confit."

The sweeting grinned up at Finn, like some horrible feral monster. Finn stepped away and hastened to the inner door.

"Here now!" said a gangling figure in Templar armor. "Wait your turn! Is your name on the list?"



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"I am not a... er... a patient," Finn explained. "I'm here from the Circle to assist. As an assistant. And the sister said I could have a cup of tea."

"Ser Otto!" the lad hallooed. "It's that mage fellow!"

Ser Otto emerged from the kitchen, and looked quizzically at the dapper young mage. Finn thought him very imposing. For a moment the young mage's self-assurance faltered. He had never had any trouble with Templars, mainly because he had always done exactly as he was told and spent as much time as possible in the library. This Templar was not scowling, but he was very, very tall. Finn tried an ingratiating smile.

"Ah! Good Ser! My traveling papers," Finn said, presenting them like a shield. "I have orders to assist at the Fereldan Free Clinic located in Threadneedle Street. This is said clinic, is it not?"

"It is," Otto agreed, looking past him with some concern at the patient on an examining table. "Mistress Bethany Hawke here is in charge."

He gestured at the pretty young woman who had glowed blue earlier. Certainly a mage, but not dressed like any Circle mage Finn had ever seen. She had on a rather nice wool gown, but over it — of all things — was an apron. Or at least Finn thought it might be. He had never actually seen such an article of clothing, but had read of them in books. He had heard that the Tranquil in the Circle's kitchens wore them, but that was not a place Finn had ever visited.

Bethany smiled slightly, brushing her hair out of her eyes with the back of her arm. "Good day to you."

She was busy with a nasty burn. The big fellow on the examining table was bearing it stoically. A very nasty, angry-looking burn indeed, probably from forging, Finn supposed. Hot metal was a perilous thing. Sometimes the Tranquil were hurt, crafting metal. The girl's hands bloomed blue again. The burn faded to a dull pink, and the man breathed deeply.

"That's better," said Bethany.

"Maker bless you, Mistress Bethany," the fellow said, rubbing his arm, looking at the healing burn in wonder. "Maker's Breath! Don't hurt a bit now. Me mum'll bring by some of her dried-apple pies. We haven't coin to pay."

"That's quite all right," the girl assured the man. "Apple pie is my favorite. We'll all enjoy it so much."

Ser Otto helped the man up from the examining table. Still rubbing his arm, utterly amazed, the man, dirty face and all, smiled shyly at the girl and touched his forelock in quite a respectful way. If he were not so very dirty, Finn would have suspected him of blushing. He walked out through the reception room, and took a cloak from a nail, wrapping up against the rain.

The lay sister came back, bearing a thick earthenware mug for Finn. "And here's your cup of tea. We always have a pot in the kitchen."

"Really? That's... very nice." It appeared he himself might be visiting a kitchen in the near future.

"Thank you, Sister Ursula," Bethany said to the sister, who gave her quite a nice smile, and resumed her post in

the waiting room.

Finn looked about him, not sure what to do. Otto patted his shoulder. "Here, lad. Sit down over there by the fire and drink your tea. Put your bag down... over there."

"I'll just finish up here," said Bethany, "and then we'll talk."

The infant horror in the waiting room set up another wail. Bethany sighed.

"— after I find out what's wrong — *now* — with little Bartholomew Gitts."

Finn had a crawling feeling that he should be offering to lend a hand, but drank his tea instead. He was no good with children. And children were no good with him.

Mistress Bethany Hawke was a mage, but people were being very polite to her. She seemed to know her business, too. Finn watched, breathing in the aroma of excellent Highever Honeygrass tea, while she dealt summarily with the snotty-nosed young Master Gitts. Not a mere cold. The beginnings of a fairly serious throat infection. Yes, that was right. The little monster was given a blast of healing energy and a dose of elfroot syrup. Had it not been for the infection that Finn could sense himself, he would have suspected the brat of shamming in order to scam a spoonful of the sugary tonic. He had done it himself, in his feckless childhood.

The slatternly mother probably liked the stuff, too.

"If you could just see your way clear to give us a bottle," the woman whined, "I wouldn't have to drag him all the way here when he's poorly."



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"I'm sorry, Mistress Gitts," Bethany replied gently. "But I am not permitted to hand out large quantities of medicaments. They could be lost or stolen. The spoonful I gave Bartholomew should be quite enough. All he needs now is a good night's sleep."

"I'm not TIRED!" bellowed Master Bartholomew.

"Yes," Ser Otto told him, lifting him bodily from the examining table and setting him on his feet. "You are. Good bye. Maker keep you."

Such a very polite Templar, Finn noted. Very commanding too. Finn almost felt ready for a good night's sleep himself. The grumbling mother gave the child the demanded confit and was on her way. Without a proper thank you, Finn noted.

Bethany washed her hands at the nearby basin, and then dried them carefully. Finn applauded her precautions, beginning to understand the reason for the apron. She put out a very pretty — and clean — hand to him.

"Bethany Hawke. This is Ser Otto, and Ser Kevan is at the door. Sister Ursula gave you your tea. Ser Irminic comes in now and then. You're Enchanter Florian, I presume?"

He bowed, properly. "Florian Phineas Horatio Aldebrant, Esquire. At your service." The 'esquire' was perhaps presumptuous in a mage, but his father really was a knight of Ferelden, with his own manor in the Dragon's Peak bannorn. The son of a knight had the right to the honor of "esquire." If he had not manifested as a mage in his thirteenth year, he might well have been addressed as "Ser Florian" himself by now.



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They were still looking at him in the kindest way. He wilted. "But everyone calls me Finn."

"Well, Finn, what do you know how to do?"

"I'm a qualified Healer," he told her, quite proud of himself. "I'm also the Circle's best linguist — fluent in Arcanum, Tevene, Antivan, and Orlesian — and their foremost expert on ancient Tevinter history."

There were still three people left in the waiting room. The eldest of them scoffed, clearly overhearing Finn.

"Ancient History! Aye, there's coin in that!"

The rest of the waiting room cackled appreciatively.

Finn cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "I suppose people consider me a bookworm. The First Enchanter said I needed to see more of the world than the library. I must say I'm looking forward to the opportunity to work here in Denerim. My parents don't live far away. Ser Otto: might I be allowed to write to them? Would they be permitted to visit? Possibly?"

Bethany caught Otto's eye, amused.

"I think it very likely," said Ser Otto. "But first, why don't you see if you can help Bethany take care of the last of the patients?"

"Oh! Yes... of course."



Even when the clinic closed for the evening, there was a bell that rang inside the house for emergencies. Sister Ursula put up the "closed" sign, and arranged the table near the fire in the large clinic room for a meal. Within

a short time, a servant arrived in a carriage, of all things, bringing in covered dishes and baskets containing a delicious-smelling supper.

Meanwhile, Ser Kevan, hardly more than a boy, showed Finn around the little house, and had him put his bag in the very nice bedchamber.

"This is yours," the boy told him. "Unless somebody needs it when they're having a baby or something. But mostly it's yours. Sister Ursula sleeps in the cathedral dormitory. One or two of us Templars always stays here watching the place. We have a little room off the kitchen."

Finn looked about him with growing satisfaction. This was nice. This was very nice indeed. It was nicer than his quarters at the Circle. It was nicer than his old room at home. It had a door. He would have privacy. He could arrange his books on the table at at the foot of the bed. He had a few of his very own, gifts from his parents. Finn knew he was far luckier than most of his fellow mages. His parents still cared about him, and they were permitted to correspond, which they did, very frequently.

Wait... were there only *two* bedchambers...?

"But where does Mistress Bethany sleep?" he asked, rather puzzled. Perhaps they made her sleep in the dormitory at the Cathedral, though that seemed an odd situation for a mage.

"She sleeps at home, of course," said Kevan, regarding him as he would a half-wit, but willing enough to gossip. "She lives with her mother, Arlessa Leandra, doesn't she?"

"But she has a Templar guard."

"Of course she does," Kevan said, his patience visible. "A crazy man killed her stepfather right on the doorstep of the Cathedral only a month ago! Somebody has to look after her. And we keep order here so the patients don't run rough-shod all over the place. She comes here in that carriage every morning, with an escort. They bring supper in that carriage every night, and take her home. We get breakfast and dinner from the Cathedral refectory, and supper from Bryland House. Come on, I'm starving."

Finn was very good at keeping his ears open. Outright questioning of Templars had always been an unwise move in the Circle. Better to simply listen and learn. These Templars were certainly the pleasantest he had met, but he had no desire to be irritating on his first day.

"I'm so glad you're here, Finn," Bethany said over the excellent steak and mushroom pie. "I don't have to worry about people trying to find me at my mother's at night. If I have to go out to deliver a baby, someone will be here to see people. That's going to be a great help. I have other commitments, too. Ser Otto and I plan to go to the Alienage now and then to see if the elves need help. And there are a few others... friends and family of a sort."

Sister Ursula asked, "How is Arlessa Habren?"

Bethany smiled thinly. "As well as I can make her. Her husband is very solicitous." Seeing Finn's confusion, she explained. "The Arlessa of Denerim. She's expecting a child."

Sister Ursula added, "She is Mistress Bethany's step-sister!" Apparently the good sister was very impressed by Bethany Hawke's lofty connections. Daughter of the Arlessa of South Reach; stepsister of the Arlessa of Denerim. Finn was fairly impressed, too. The connections might well explain why he had never seen her at the Circle.

They talked over the cases they had treated today, and Bethany filled Finn in about local ailments and the various women in the neighborhood who might give birth any day. Finn felt a little queasy at the prospect. He had healed illnesses and wounds, but there had never been any call at the Circle to do anything so disturbingly messy as deliver a child. Finn could not remember ever seeing a baby up close.

"I don't actually have a lot of experience with midwifery. Perhaps I should observe for now."

Bethany was obviously much too nice to laugh at him, but Finn suspected she wanted to.

Anora was thrilled to be back in Denerim. Even better was to be back in Denerim with Fergus. After considerable thought, they decided to live in Highever House, and travel back and forth to the Palace or Fort Drakon as needed for their work. Spring was stirring in the capital, and the footman-gardener was getting the rooftop garden in order. It was one of Anora's favorite places in the world. Sitting amongst the dormant roses, she could see most of Denerim, while most of Denerim could not see that she was watching.

"Kane is worthless," Fergus told her bluntly, when they at last had the luxury of privacy in their bedchamber. "Not raised as a nobleman, and no natural talent for it. No interest in learning, either. The officers have been doing their duty, by and large, but it's time for a thorough inspection. The new works along the harbor haven't made the progress I expected."

Anora knew that if Fergus was disappointed, Father would be livid. "It's a good thing we're back. That Tevinter slaver ship could arrive at any time." She paused, uneasy. "If it hasn't already."

"I checked. Properly. They haven't come yet. Our own people are on alert in Highever, and I trust them. Hawke has Amaranthine sewn up. *There's* a fellow who's not about to loosen his grip on what's his! Too bad the Arl of Denerim isn't more like him."

Anora was not as charmed by Bann Adam as her husband, but agreed that he would have been a far more competent Arl than any of the Kendells that Fate had thrown Ferelden's way.

"I heard something interesting," Anora said, sipping her mulled wine. "There is a free clinic in Ferelden now. Bethany Hawke talked the Grand Cleric into supporting her. Some Templars are on the premises: Ser Otto and Alfstanna's brother Irminric. Arl Bryland left Bethany a house in the Market district, quite near the Cathedral. She's healing people there."

Fergus paused, in the act of getting into bed.

"I thought she'd still be in South Reach."

"No, the ladies returned to Denerim not long ago. It's quite a wonderful idea, isn't it? So incredibly generous of Beth-

any to use her inheritance for the public good. I think I shall visit, but I'll give her a bit of warning first, naturally."

"Arlessa Leandra will be calling on you. You'll want to hear what she thinks of it."

Between them they heard the gossip of the salons and the barracks; of the state offices and the market. Some of it was encouraging. Some of it was ominous. Much of it was self-contradictory.

— The Arlessa of Denerim had gone mad, and her long-suffering husband had locked her up in her room. Others said that the Arl was a fiend, who locked up his innocent wife so he could have orgies at his estate.

— The Arl of Denerim cared only for dressing up in fine armor and cutting a great figure. His duties were left to his steward, his seneschal, the captain of the city guard, and the harbormaster. They were mostly good men, but needed someone in authority to mediate their internecine disputes. Or, if you preferred, the Arl was in league with the Orlesians, and was siphoning off Fereldan gold.

— The Arlessa of South Reach had been driven from the arling by the small-minded prejudices of the locals and the intransigence of functionaries. She was in poor spirits. Her niece was on the point of riding off to the army alone. Her daughter had opened a free clinic and was as popular as ever. Others said that her daughter was a sinister blood mage, who had deceived the Grand Cleric herself. Her stepson Lord Lothar spent most of

his time with the Arl of Denerim's sisters in their nursery. Alternatively, her stepson was locked in the dungeons, and she was planning to kill him and take South Reach for herself.

— A group of minor banns were discontented at the absence of the King and Queen. Who cared about foreign wars? It was the Crown's business to rule Ferelden. If the Queen wanted to play the heroine and fight darkspawn, then Loghain should let her wander off and come back home himself. Unless he was trying to get her with child, in which case, he should come home as soon as that was accomplished.

— The weather was holding well, and with luck, Ferelden should have another good harvest. The fishing fleet had also done well. Rare timber from the Brecilian Forest was selling at the highest price in memory, and Antiva wanted all the Fereldan wool on the market. Naysayers opined that it was all too good to last. The crash was coming: famine, pestilence, and war.

— The conspirators behind Arl Bryland's murder had been caught, and were found to be Crows, acting on the orders of his daughter Lady Habren. Or the conspirators had been found to be Orlesian agents. Or they were Templars. Or they were blood mages.

— The elves were getting above themselves, and needed a good set-down. There were too many of them on the roads, giving honest folk a fright. The Queen was too soft on elves: giving them land, giving them privileges, building them fancy lodgings. The Queen should look after her *real* subjects. There were few who disputed this, other than the elves themselves.

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— Quite a few people thought that the Queen was an avatar of Andraste herself, and thus her war against the Blight was an Exalted March.

Anora did not particularly care for that last rumor, though it had its uses.

The very next night, she and Fergus supped with the Arlessa of South Reach. Bethany, who usually took her dinner and supper at the clinic, was present for the meal. She was in rather good spirits.

Better spirits than the Arlessa, Lothar, and Charade. While the widowed Arlessa's feelings were quite understandable, they had affected the young boy and her niece, who had little to take their minds off their situation.

"It's a good thing you have friends and playmates here in Denerim," Fergus said to Lothar.

"Yes, my lord," Lothar replied, dutiful and not entirely convinced. "It's better than South Reach. But they're *girls*, my lord. They play with *dolls*. Even Jewel is awfully lady-like for a mabari. They play house and I always have to be the husband."

"Being a husband is no bad thing," Fergus told him, quite straight-faced. Anora covered her mouth with her hand, and kicked him under the table.

Lothar scowled. "Being a husband *every day* is. I know Corbus can't leave the army, but I wish Bevin would come to Denerim. We could play war for a change."

"Everybody's playing war. I wish *I* could play house," Charade muttered.

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They spoke briefly of the rest of the family. Arlessa Habren was still quite ill, and Bethany was calling on her. She had not come out in public since her father's death. Anora caught Bethany's eye, letting her know that they would be discussing this in private.

Fergus asked Lothar, "Doesn't she come to play with you sometimes?"

"Never," Lothar said flatly. "She hates Faline and Jancey as much as she hates me."

"Lothar!" Leandra scolded him gently. "You mustn't say such things! Of course your sister doesn't hate you. Or Arl Kane's sisters, either."

"Yes, my lady," Lothar agreed listlessly, with a sad old man's smile on his young face.

After the boy was sent to bed, Anora gave them all a serious look.

"Let us treat each other as friends and allies," she said. "What's wrong with Habren?"

"Mad as a dancing dwarf," Charade declared.

"I'm not sure she's mad... not exactly..." Bethany said. "I come to the estate regularly to see how she's doing. She's three months gone with child, and it's made her ill, as it often does at that stage. She's done some wild and violent things: attacked the governess, tried to throw Faline's puppy out the window —"

Fergus raised his brows.

"— She attacked Kane himself. Attacked me. Attacked Mother. She rages and screams and threatens. Mind you, I don't know if

she does it because she's mad, or because Kane has locked her up. She's been spoiled and unreasonable from the time I first met her. She's used to getting her way. Without her father, there's no one to take her part. It could be that her reason is affected by her pregnancy. It's also possible that she did something in the heat of anger, and Kane locked her up for it, which has exacerbated her condition. It's hard to tell. She's completely incapable of being polite to me, so I'm not the most objective observer."

Fergus nodded, rather concerned. Habren was his cousin, after all. "Is Kane abusing her? Beating her?"

"I've seen no evidence of it. Now and then I've seen a few bruises, but she's so wild and furious when I'm there that it's possible that they might be self-inflicted, or caused when Kane defends himself. He told me he's hiring a nurse to stay with her. That would be for the best."

Anora had had enough of Habren, whom she had always disliked. "If you see evidence of abuse, let us know, of course. Now let us move on to more interesting topics. Do tell us about your clinic."

The supper, altogether, was a mine of information. At the end, when the guests were seen to the door, Charade managed to whisper a request to Anora to speak to her alone the next day.

"I want to ride out and join the army, Your Grace," Charade told Anora, as they sat together in the rooftop garden of Highever House. "More specifically, I want to join Roth-

gar. He's going to be out west until Maker knows when. Adam gave me the money for my dowry. I'm going to go out there, hunt my man down, drag him to the nearest priest, and marry him. And I'm going to stay by his side and fight with him." She laughed, embarrassed. "At his side. Not *with* him. Not *against* him. Well, not much, I hope."

"Your aunt will miss you," Anora said gently.

"My aunt never knew of my existence until about six months ago. Bethany is here in town. If my aunt wants to see more of her, she can go to the clinic a few times a week and help her. They have breakfast together every day. If Bethany married a nobleman and lived in his house, my aunt wouldn't complain. And she has Lothar to care for. She does a good job seeing after him. She's made friends, too. I don't see the point of delaying my life indefinitely so she has someone to sit with her and receive guests. So I've got a plan."

Anora inclined her head, ready to listen.

"You send regular couriers to the army. I'm a good horsewoman, and I know how to take care of myself. Send me with the next rider. I even have the money for my own horses. Rothgar must be somewhere near West Hill. I'll stop there and hear the news."

"And then the hunting down, dragging to the priest, and marrying, I take it," said Anora.

"Exactly."

"I sent dispatches to the King two days ago. If nothing extraordinary happens, I will send the next batch four



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days from now. Can you be ready by then?"

"Absolutely."

"Don't take five hundred sovereigns with you," Anora advised. "It would be very heavy. Lord Rothgar will simply have to trust that you're good for it."

Charade had not yet left for the west when the harbor-master sent urgent word that a Tevinter ship was sailing into Denerim harbor



Fergus was prepared for this, though he had not expected the Tevinters to come quite so soon. A number of scenarios had been considered, and there was always the possibility that it was a bona fide diplomatic mission. It would not do to simply attack the ship on docking. The ship was headed for the South Docks, which made sense. Whether it was a diplomatic mission, which would go to the Palace, or a slaver gang, which would head toward their underground compound, the South Docks would be the place to seek harbor.

There were two entrances to the slaver compound: one in the tenement in Runagate Court, and one behind The Condemned Man, a dockyards tavern. The latter was a short walk from the south end of the docks. The former was reached by Amaranthine Street, a (comparatively) wide and twisting lane that flowed into King's Way. A number of ways had been scouted to reach either in advance of the suspects. Fergus and some his men were well-positioned to observe, in a warehouse on the corner of Amaranthine Street and South Docks Lane.



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If these were indeed the slavers, they would have no reason to think that their usual protections were not in place: the befuddled harbormaster, the incurious officials. They would be on the lookout for their sister ship, which was in harbor, and "crewed" by a number of city guardsmen and Templars in disguise. There was also one of the army mages aboard. He was well-versed in the Litany of Adralla, a sovereign protection against Blood Magic.

Fergus had borrowed the new mage from the clinic today, young Enchanter Florian, as he was something of an expert on Tevinter. With him were Ser Otto and Ser Irminric. Young Kevan had been left behind, since someone had to remain at the clinic. The Templars were eager for the adventure, unsurprisingly.

"You're with me," Fergus told the mage and the Templars. "We're going to observe, at first. If they go to the slave ship or to the underground compound, we'll move in on them immediately. I'll want you to advise me on Tevinter lore. If these are diplomats, they'll need to be greeted properly."

"Er... I've never *been* to Tevinter, you understand," said Finn, somewhat embarrassed. "I just know the language and history."

"That's more than I know," Fergus said, with a snort of laughter. "We don't want to insult them if they're not criminals."

"Of course not. If they are, of course..."

"Then we show no mercy. And you, I'm told, know the Litany of Adralla in case of Blood Magic."



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"Of course. Bethany was so disappointed not to come here today."

Otto gave Irminric a look. Personally, he thought Bethany a more powerful and quick-witted mage than Finn, and actually better suited to this kind of challenge, but noblemen were sometimes blinded by chivalry. Odd, in the brother of the formidable Girl Warden.

Sure enough, Fergus shook his head. "I wouldn't put Bethany is this kind of danger. She's a sweet young girl, and her brother's a good friend of mine."

Finn also privately thought that Bethany was likely a far more formidable mage than Teyrn Fergus realized, but perhaps it was for the best. Bethany was a good public face for mages in Denerim: pretty, gentle, and well-mannered. None of them could picture Bethany in a fight, though Finn suspected that she was quite powerful enough to defend herself.

A slight stir in the crowd. There was Kane, in his golden parade armor, with his dog, his bodyguards, and the captain of the Denerim City Guard. Fergus cursed silently. He had been notified of the event, as Denerim was, after all, his responsibility. He was *supposed* to stay out of the way. Instead, he had decided to come and watch the excitement, no doubt wanting to make sure that if they confiscated this splendid ship, he got his rightful share. Not only was the armor attracting attention, but all Denerim knew the man's handsome face.

"Who's that, my lord?" whispered Finn.

"The new Arl of Denerim," Fergus growled, knowing that it



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would be improper to express his opinion publicly. Kane was a mistake and a misfortune in his opinion. Yes, he had the bloodright, but nothing else to recommend him but his pretty looks. At least Anora and Bronwyn saw through the façade.

Kane was chatting with the harbormaster, who could hardly tell him to be quiet. Did the man not understand that this was a delicate operation? On the other hand, Fergus could not ignore Kane's rights, without raising some perfectly justified questions and angry commentary from his fellow nobles.

The ship was drawing close to the docks now, moving in gracefully. *VINDICTA* was its name. A fine, large vessel, with a big stern deck cabin that must be home to an important man. In fact, were it a legitimate mission, the leader would likely stay on board, and simply send a messenger to the Palace, with an official notice of his presence.

It took time. Fergus watched, almost unblinking, noting the signals that everyone was in position. Kane had at last gone inside the harbormaster's office, and was out of sight. There was a welcoming party at the underground compound too, with lookouts posted outside to alert them. A good man headed that: Sergeant Kylon of the City Guard. In fact, the man had ten times the sense of his captain, though none of his superior's influential friends and patrons.

The ship was docking. After a long wait, the passengers disembarked down a gangplank. A tall man with an oiled beard in luxurious robes was surrounded by



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henchman and servants. Crates of luggage were unloaded. A party was told off, and moved in the direction of the other Tevinter ship, some distance away. The harbormaster, warned in advance, did not approach them, nor did they attempt to report to his office. They were asking no questions at all. That did not bode well.

Finn was sure that the leader must be a magister, but all important Tevinters were, of course. They had to be tolerated in diplomatic missions, because they were the elite of their nation.

All right. The party going to the ship would be arrested at the site. It might be innocent enough: naturally the crew of any Tevinter ship would be curious about fellow countrymen. Fergus hoped the rest of the Tevinters moved on quickly enough not to observe the arrests, and also that they would be done quietly enough not to alarm their fellows or cause a riot at the docks. Another group was watching the ship. How the crew were treated depended on what the magister did next.

The magister did not turn south toward the tavern, but instead moved toward Amaranthine Street. They were walking confidently, moving along, their numbers and bodyguards formidable enough to cause others to avoid them. The guards shadowed them, trailing through the alleys, crouched on the roofs. A signal, and Fergus stepped out of his own observation post with his party, and they followed the Tevinters up Amaranthine Street. Finn made a face, not liking the situation, but seeing no way out of it.



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And then the magister turned left into Runagate Court. "That's that," Fergus muttered.

Unknown to the Tevinters, they were surrounded, and this was the signal to attack. Fergus and his men moved in from the back and sides.

Kylon and his men stepped out of the tenement, surprising the the Tevinters. Kylon walked forward, holding up his badge of office.

"I am Sergeant Daniel Kylon of the Denerim City Guard. I arrest you in the name of the Crown for the crime of slaving. Lay down your weapons, and you will be spared!"

The magister actually laughed, a light, urbane sound.

"My dear fellow, you must be joking..." His staff was lifted, and instantly, Ser Otto, next to Fergus, called down a Holy Smite. Two of the Tevinters collapsed, and the magister staggered. With furious curses, the battle was joined.

Finn had never seen Blood Magic before. He had heard the whispers and the dirty sniggers – the same sort one heard when the lads were talking about girls. He had heard the warnings and read of the consequences. Seeing it was something entirely different. Arms were slashed, and blood misted in magical whirlwinds. Finn gabbled out the Litany, stammering and gasping, genuinely frightened. It was all too clear what would have happened without the Litany, without the Templars, without a well-prepared armed company and archers on the roofs. The Tevinters' bodyguards went down very fast, but the mages, led by the magis-

ter himself, put up a powerful defense. Ser Irminic used another Smite, and disabled the younger mages, but once again, the magister was barely rocked by it. Still there were more Fereldans than Tevinters, and they were winning.

And then it went pear-shaped.

"*Fasta vass!*" shouted the magister. "To the ship!"

He pointed his staff, and blew a hole through the wall of the neighboring house. Screams rose up from inside the dwelling. Fergus roared, "Take him down! Take him down!" and the massed company ran at the magister.

Finn had never in his life been so terrified. Feeling feeble and totally outclassed, he focused on healing the injured and babbling out the Litany to thwart the blood spells. A young woman ran from the house, carrying a bleeding toddler. The magister slipped behind them, using them as shields. His henchmen gave him cover, casting spells back at the Fereldans.

A pair of powerful young mages were cornered in the ruins, and refused to surrender, determined to do all the damage they could. A soldier screamed, clutching his head, while his blood boiled.

"Finn! Get over here!" Fergus shouted. He had his shield up and ran low. The panicked Tevinters were missing some of their casts, demoralized by the overwhelming force against them. Kylon, who knew every alley in Denerim, squeezed through a narrow passage and then was around the building. He barreled into the fleeing magister head

on, knocking him down.

Pinned under the Fereldan, with a sword's sharp edge to his throat, the magister cried. "I surrender! I surrender!"

In the pandemonium, no one else could hear him. Kylon pressed the sword in, his blood up. The skin of the magister's throat dented a little.

"I'll make it worth your while," the magister croaked. "I have riches on my ship. Riches beyond your dreams. I have gold!" He managed an ingratiating smile. "Why don't we leave them to it, eh?" he said, flicking a glance at the bloody fight going on in the ruined house. "You and I... we're men of the world... come with me to my ship and we'll talk..."

"Don't move!" Kylon snarled. "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

In truth he was fairly alarmed. He had his sword to the man's throat, but this was a blood mage, and not just any blood mage, but a Tevinter magister. Who knew what he could do? The slightest gesture could bring a horde of demons down on them. He could just kill this man, but he was the leader, and Teyrn Fergus said he wanted to question him.

"No," the magister wheezed, the smile stretching into a grin. "I think you're a sensible man. After all, you caught me, and the others are just flailing about. Don't be a fool. They'll take it all for themselves and give you a pat on the head. Let me up, and there'll be chest of gold, all for you..."

"Don't move!"

"Hmmm... how to convince you?" The magister knit his brow, thinking. He moved his head, just a little up and to the side.

Enough to draw blood from Kylon's sword. It swirled into a mist. One moment the guard sergeant was looking down at the magister's grinning face, and then the next he was in the air, flying, flying, the world eerily silent.

He slammed into the house and lay dazed.

The concussion brought down more of the back wall, but the magister was already up and running toward the docks. The Tevinters in the house and the courtyard outside were down, dead or Smitten. Fergus tore past, jumping over the remains of the back wall, and saw the robed figure making a dash down the street.

"Shoot him!" he roared, running. "Shoot him! Finn! Otto! Irminric! Come on!"

Arrows whistled down, but the magister seemed untouchable, protected by a bubble of silver light. Finn, wondering how he could be in a running battle in the streets of Denerim against a Tevinter magister, puffed along in the rear. Men on the rooftops shouted to the men on the docks.

"Finn!" yelled Fergus, turning the corner onto Dockyard Lane. "What's that shell around him?"

"It's a force field!" Finn gasped back, "But he can't keep it up forever. I don't think he can cast through it, either!"

Fergus was running in heavy armor, but he was more accustomed to running than the magister, and in far better condition. Otto and Irminric were keeping up with him effortlessly.

"We got to get closer!" said Otto. "When he drops the

shield, we'll both smite him!"

Irminric grunted agreement. "Be ready with the Litany, Finn!"

The Litany took energy, and Finn's was flagging. He hoped he would have enough for another go.

Ahead of them, a crowd of men were on the dock by the VINDICTA, including Kane, holding forth to the captain of the City Guard and the harbormaster. Fergus cursed their stupidity. Sunlight glinted on the Arl's bright head and golden armor. They were all gossiping instead of keeping watch. The shouts penetrated their talk, and they turn to look, open-mouthed and gormless, at the dark figure of the magister running straight at them.

Fergus was only yards from the magister when the mage dropped his shield and slammed a fist of energy into the group of notables barring the way to his ship. Kane's golden armor made him a visible target. Everyone standing by the gangplank was knocked off his feet. Half a dozen of them toppled into the water, including Kane, his dog, the harbormaster, and the captain.

Instantly, the pursuers were on the magister, and number of unpleasant things happened to him.

He was hit with two Holy Smites at close range, which disabled him; Finn babbled out the Litany, which made it impossible for him to use blood magic; and Fergus beheaded him with a sweep of his sword, which made all the rest moot.

Kane went into the water, surprised, disbelieving. Kane

went into the water, just as he thought he had a real grasp on being an arl. Kane went into the water with plans yet to be achieved. He had just given the girls their own ponies, and they were planning a picnic in the country. He was expecting an heir. He was making friends.

He struck out, trying to swim to the surface, but the glittering armor weighed him down. Thrashing, he clutched at the captain of the guard, who was fighting with a buckle, trying to escape the armor that was killing him. The man kicked at him frantically, but Kane only tightened his grip, determined to cling to anything that could save him.

Above him was the sun, a circle of light swimming in the waves, growing smaller and dimmer as he sank. Kane stared up at it, still disbelieving, until his bursting lungs betrayed him, and he gasped, taking a last deep breath... of ocean.

The tangled bodies sank further, a single strap on the captain's armor connecting them briefly until the eddies pushed them apart. Curious fish passed by the dead men. After a time, some drew closer.



Up on the docks, a rescue mission was organized. Finn finally stopped vomiting, and was helped along by a sympathetic Otto.

Kane's mabari bitch was beside herself: barking frantically, paddling about, trying to find some bit of her human that she could seize on, in order to drag him to safety.

Fergus shouted, "Ten sovereigns to anyone who can rescue the Arl!" He rebuked himself, and added, "Who

rescues anyone!"

Men and elves plunged into the troubled water. The word was passed excitedly, all down the docks, and figures dove in, came up for another breath, and went down again.

Kylon dashed up, bruised but relieved to see that the magister was dead.

"They've secured the prisoners, my lord. If one so much as bites his lip, he'll be killed. "

"Well done, Kylon."

The sergeant shook his head. "Not so well done, my lord. I had him. I had him, and I should have killed him on the spot."

Ser Otto said, "You are not the first to be overcome by a blood mage, and this was the most powerful I've ever seen. We are fortunate he did no greater harm."

"He did harm enough," Fergus grunted, watching the desperate scene below. Kane had been down a long time. "Somebody get a rope around that dog and get her out of the water."

"Bloody hell!" shouted a man in the water. "She bit me, my lord!"

Otto quietly told the horrified Kylon what had happened. The sergeant immediately began unbuckling his armor, wanting to help.

"Don't," said Fergus. "We already have a crowd down there. I offered a reward."

A elf rose to the surface, clutching what looked like a handful of sodden clothing. A rope was lowered, and the harbormaster was hauled up, slack and unconscious. Finn set to work reviving the man, and he was soon coughing

but alert, astonished to be alive.

The blond elf who had saved him scrambled up the pier to stand, wet and panting, nearby. Fergus tapped him on the shoulder.

"Well done! What's your name?"

"Taeodor Cibrae, my lord."

"Come to Highever House, and you'll get the rest of your reward," said Fergus, digging into his purse. He drew out two sovereigns, and pressed them into the elf's palm. "For now, take this on account."

"My lord!" cried the elf, overjoyed.

Kane's mabari was at last so exhausted that she could no longer fight off the well-meaning man who was trying to save her. People who cared nothing for drowned arls hurried to help the poor faithful dog, and Finn was pressed into doing what he could for her. Fergus, as a Fereldan, was willing to pay for a mabari what he would for anyone else.

Two other men were drawn out of the water: both were harbor employees, and one was dead. Fergus still paid the man who found him something for his pains. That left Kane and the guard captain.

"Anyone in armor would sink like a stone," Irminric said heavily. "We may never recover the bodies."

"Maker's Breath!" Fergus groaned. Was Denerim cursed? Was the title "Arl of Denerim" cursed? And how was he supposed to break the news to Habren? What if Habren ended up ruling Denerim on behalf of her child? It was all a disaster. A

bizarre, unlooked-for happenstance. Why couldn't the stupid popinjay have stayed at home where he belonged?

"Maybe one or both of them got his armor off and swam further down the bay," Otto counseled. "We need not give up hope yet."

They busied themselves there at the docks for over an hour, while the divers kept up their efforts. Twenty sovereigns was serious money, and well worth the trouble. In the meantime, the VINDICTA was secured and its crew taken under guard to Fort Drakon for questioning. The army mage stationed on the other ship was left at the docks for any further medical help that might be required. Fergus and his party walked back to Runagate Court to see what needed to be done there.

They had managed to capture one of the mages and three of the bodyguards. The mage was young and terrified, and the Templars stood guard over him. Finn went to work healing the injured, while Fergus and Kylon listened to the lamentations of the woman whose house had been destroyed, and the sobs of her little girl. The child had been hurt by splinters, but Finn put that right. The terror of the explosion was not so easily overcome.

"What am I to do?" the young woman cried, over and over. "What am I to do? I've lost everything!"

Not quite everything, an examination found, but her spinning wheel, the source of her livelihood, had indeed been destroyed, along with all of her unspun wool. That

caused her to burst out in tears again.

"I owe Master Pinchbeck for that! He'll have my skin for the debt!"

Unable to bear a crying woman, Fergus told her to go to Highever House with her child, and they'd find work for her. Likely he was dumping his problem on Anora — or more likely the housekeeper — but he trusted either woman to find a fair solution.

He felt guilty. Perhaps he should have attacked the moment the Tevinters left the ship. Perhaps they should have killed them all the moment they docked. It would have saved lives, but how could they make a practice of killing foreigners on sight? Perhaps Kylon should not have followed lawful procedure and identified himself. Who was to say? What happened, had happened.

No word came from the docks about the Arl or the captain. As far as Fergus was concerned, Kylon would get the promotion. That was an easy decision. It was also worrying that a mage had caused so much harm. It might cause a backlash against the new freedoms for mages serving in the army... for Bethany, selflessly working to heal people. Fergus decided that the way to present it was that it had been done by an armed party of foreign slavers. Yes, there were mages, but there were plenty of warriors, too. A slaver gang. That was the tale that would be told publicly,

The real problem was that they had lost yet another Arl of Denerim.

"Tell me he left a will," groaned Anora.

They were in the arl's study, closeted with his steward, his seneschal, and his secretary. Unsurprisingly, the men were deeply shocked by the sudden event. The Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever had come to call, telling them that Arl Kane was almost certainly drowned in the harbor. A freak happenstance. With them was the Arl's mabari bitch, exhausted and heartbroken. The dog dashed away and ran upstairs to the nursery, to find what was left of her pack.

"He did indeed, Your Grace," the steward assured her. "The Arl was punctilious where his family was concerned. He left all his personal fortune — his gold, his movables, his jewelry, and clothing — to his sisters, in equal parts. His wife, Arlessa Habren, was left nothing at all. Nor was the unborn child provided for. I advised his lordship against it, but he would have it so. Naturally, a child of the Arl would inherit the entailed holdings of the Arling of Denerim, but this is a posthumous child, which can never be acknowledged by his father, and so the legal situation is somewhat murky. It would be a matter for the Landsmeet to decide if this child should inherit, or rather the Lady Faline, who is otherwise the presumptive heir, and who is named as such in his will."

"Did Kane name a personal guardian for his sisters, in case of his death?" asked Fergus.

"Yes. Arlessa Leandra of South Reach. His instruction is that his wife, Arlessa Habren, is never under any circum-

stances to serve in that capacity." The steward grimaced. "As to the arling, he names... me... to continue as steward, until Lady Faline is of age. I realize that this is a situation that may not satisfy the Landsmeet or the Crown. Some may feel that Arlessa Habren should hold the arling in trust for her unborn child."

Anora exchanged a look with Fergus. They knew that neither Loghain nor Bronwyn would tolerate Habren as ruling Arlessa of Denerim for a moment. However, she did have certain rights that had to be observed for decency's sake. Nor could she be summarily ejected from the estate. Someone must talk to her. Unfortunately, it looked like it was going to be... them.

Bethany was summoned, as Habren's Healer, as well as Arlessa Leandra and Charade, who would break the news to the girls.

"We'll take care of them," Charade assured Anora. "But don't include us in the conversation with Habren. She hates us, and it would just make her angry."

Leandra sighed, but did not attempt to contradict the truth this time.

It had to be faced. Anora looked a great deal more composed than Fergus felt, as they approached Habren's private apartments. The steward unlocked them, and stood aside.

"I'll go first," Fergus said, uneasy about Habren's temper.

No one was in the parlor. Fergus pushed the next door open, and called out, "Habren? It's Fergus Cousland. Are you all right? Habren?"

It was a large, luxuriously furnished bedchamber, but it smelled unclean. Anora made a little grimace of distaste as she followed her husband. Bethany sniffed the air for any scent of illness or infection. The steward, even more uneasy, followed behind.

The big bed was in the far corner, and the bed curtains were closed. A tray of half-eaten food was on the table by the bed.

"Habren!" Fergus called again. "Are you here?" All sorts of hideous possibilities flashed through his brain.

With a snap, the bed curtains were torn back, and Habren burst out of the bed, dressed only in a soiled nightshift. Her pregnancy was not noticeable. It had been only three months, after all.

"Fergus!" she shrieked. "Get me out of here!"

Bethany found her a dressing gown, and Habren snatched it from her without acknowledgement.

"Kane's been keeping me a prisoner!" she shouted, stuffing her arms into the sleeves. "Where is he?" She stared at Anora, and moderated her tone slightly. "What are you doing here?"

It was a very rude question, asked rudely. Anora's face hardened.

"We have news for you, Arlessa," she said. "It would best if you sat down."

"Kane could be back anytime!" Habren protested. "I've got to get away! You don't know what he —"

"Habren!" Fergus shouted. "Just sit down and listen!"

In the little parlor, Fergus quietly told her the day's events.

"It's likely he drowned, Habren," he finished. "We may never find the body. He went in to the water wearing armor."

His cousin's sulky face lit with joy.

"Praise the Maker!" Habren declared. "The bastard deserved it! Can you believe that he dared to keep *me* a prisoner? I want those horrible little sisters of his out of here before sundown!"

Her four visitors studied her keenly. This was Habren: rude, unkind, and obnoxious, but she did not seem to be insane.

"That is not possible," Anora told her. "You are not ruling Arlessa, but Dowager Arlessa once more. Your child, if born alive and healthy, might be the heir to Denerim, but Lady Faline also has a claim, and was declared the heir in your husband's will."

"But —"

Anora ignored the interruption. "It is a matter for the King's wisdom and the Landsmeet's ratification. As Chancellor of the realm, this is my ruling in the interim: the steward here will administer the arling under my general supervision, and the seneschal the household. You will have complete freedom of movement, and an appropriate allowance. However, I understand that the Arl's sisters are on the floor above. You are not to go there or otherwise visit or harass them. They will be visited by Arlessa Leandra of South Reach and others as the Arlessa deems proper, since she is their personal guardian. The girls will also be provided with an allowance. You are not to interfere with them, nor with the administration of the arling. If you disobey this decree, it will be regarded as your abdication of all rights of inheritance on your behalf and on that of your child."

"This is an outrage!" Habren hissed. "You've always hated me!"

"Habren, don't be stupid," Fergus growled.

Habren subsided somewhat. Fergus was a little like her father, and he had actually come looking for her, unlike anybody else.

"It is my decree," Anora said coldly, "as Chancellor of the realm. Leave those girls alone. I understand that Mistress Bethany here has been your Healer —"

"I never want to see her again!"

"As you wish," Bethany said calmly, never wanting to see Habren again, either.

"Then you will have to engage your own Healer or midwife. I will arrange with the seneschal for the first payment of your allowance, Arlessa Habren," said Anora. "This is a temporary measure. Your husband left you no coin or other means of support in his will. Do not overspend your allowance, for no more will be forthcoming until the beginning of the next quarter. Do not expect a decision from the Landsmeet until the national emergency of the Blight is over, or until the child is born. That's all I've got to say." She rose to her feet, wanting to leave.

"I'll see to arranging the funeral," Fergus told her more kindly. "But we'll want to wait. Perhaps there's been a miracle, or perhaps..."

"Well, I wouldn't arrange *anything* for him," Habren declared. "The Maker has avenged me, as far as I'm concerned, and good on Him. Do as you please. Send a maid to me," she told the steward. "I'm going out to the market."

Then, gracelessly, grudgingly, she gave Anora a nod of acknowledgement, and turned her back on them all, looking for something to wear.



CALLISTA HOWE, ARLESSA OF AMARANTHINE

CHAPTER 14

THE ALLIANCE SETS FORTH

JUST AS THE ARMY WAS PREPARING TO LEAVE JADER, THE FIRST WAVE OF REFUGEES ARRIVED. Some of them were deserters from the Imperial army, saying nothing about their experiences for fear of hanging. Some of them included eyewitnesses to the fall of Val Royeaux. These survivors had plenty to say. Leliana and Silas tasked themselves with hearing these stories and matching the information with what the Wardens had seen in the Fade. The tale they heard next was one of the worst.

The haggard woman was halting in her speech: sometimes searching for the right words of power and horror. Her gestures were broad and eccentric. It was not surprising that some considered her mad.

"I saw them. I saw them ripping up the children. The children... I saw their faces... ugly. They peeled the skin back and stuck the heads on sticks. I ran fast, holding the baby. I ran and ran, and then I heard them coming up from the noble quarter, so I ran back to the south toward the docks. They caught some

of the people behind me, and such a squealing there was! I got into a doorway, and made the baby be quiet. The door was open, and so I climbed up to a window and jumped to the roof next door. I ran and ran over the roofs until I could see the ships. They threw me on a boat and I thought I was safe. And then I looked to see why the baby was so, so quiet, and I then I knew I'd held him too tight..."

She was penniless, of course. Penniless and starving. The Chantry was worried about the expense of providing for these poor people, some of whom had once been rich, and were dressed in rags of silk. Bronwyn was not very sympathetic to the Chantry's position.

"Let them bloody well sell a few of those gold vessels, and buy grain for the poor! I expect them to set up something to feed these people. How much would it cost to have cauldrons of soup or porridge, anyway? The Chantry's dripping in gold and jewels, so I don't want them to come poor-mouthing to the steward! There are the naval barracks, half empty by the docks. That will provide temporary housing for a great many people. Oh – and we're confiscating the townhouses of Madame de Frontenac and the Sieur de Lys. I'll give orders to house people there – and not just one to two noble families, either. I wish I had a good practical Fereldan noblewoman here to organize things. I think I'll write to Bann Alfstanna or see if old Seria MacCoo is hale enough to travel. She'd sort them out."

She sent a note to the Revered Mother, outlining her

expectations, and then had to speak to the woman herself when the priest raced across the square, agog at the Queen's demands.

"We're at war, Revered Mother," Bronwyn said shortly. "We're at war with an enemy that will not permit the Chantry to be neutral. In fact, we know that they made a special target of the Grand Cathedral. I cannot believe that you cannot feed the poor for the duration of the emergency. Grain is stockpiled high in the granaries, and the Chantry's coffers – don't attempt to deny it – are overflowing. I want this done."

"But..." the priest flailed, trying to make the young woman understand. "There are so *many* of them! How can we take the time to assess them? How can we be sure which are deserving orthodox Andrasteans, and which are heretics and rascals? Some people with coin to buy food might cheat, and dress in rags to obtain that to which they have no right! Even some bad elements in the city – elves, apostates, and the like – might attempt to take advantage of the Chantry's generosity!"

"You're right. There's no time to "assess" them. So don't. Feed them! I'd rather a rascal had a full belly than innocent victims went starving! Just make them form a line and have some Templars on hand to keep order and keep bullies from pushing their way ahead of others. That's the best we can do for now."

The woman was gaping at her, horrified at the idea of putting sanctified grain in the maws of the scum of the earth.

Bronwyn was unimpressed at the priest's obvious prejudice against elves. And some of those despised apostates had come knocking at Bronwyn's door – so to speak – willing to serve in the army or as Grey Wardens. Nonetheless, this was the Revered Mother of Jader, and there was no time to find someone more broad-minded to replace her. Bronwyn did not want to leave bad feeling behind her, and tried tact.

"A good deed is a good deed, even if bestowed on the unworthy. And there are so many in need. Some of them might have done wrong in their lives... who hasn't? But many are suffering innocents. Think of the good will... the prestige the Chantry will gain by saving so many lives. Even among those rascals you speak of, there may be hearts to be softened by good works."

That was true enough, and the Revered Mother was somewhat mollified. Besides, quite a few healthy young orphans had come to the Chantry. In no time at all, they would be useful servants of the Maker.

The last, most unpleasant duty, was to choose which Wardens would be left behind.

Riordan had felt he needed all his Wardens, trusting to the depth of Orlesian recruiting and the immense resources of the Grey Warden fortress at Montsimnard. Bronwyn worried over the matter, and finally decided that a small band of Fereldan Wardens must be left behind at Jader. In the west, anything was possible. Someone must remain to

recruit more in case of disaster. For that matter, someone must remain behind in case messages came from other Warden posts, or other Wardens arrived in Jader, which was not impossible. Two Wardens were still in Denerim: Idunn and Ketil. They were not enough to raise another army of Wardens in the wake of catastrophe.

First she met with her original team of Wardens: Anders, Tara, Leliana, Danith, Astrid, and Broasca. In this group she also included comparative latecomers like Jowan, Carver, Adaia, and Oghren. They were the core of the Fereldan Wardens, and she needed their input before making serious decisions about the order.

Not one of them wanted to be left out of the coming campaign. She sympathized with their feelings, but wanted sound leadership at her back.

"Leave some of the people who Joined in the south," Astrid urged. "Some are quite experienced now, and perfectly reliable."

"At least one of each race," Tara suggested.

"And a mage," Anders declared. "At least one of them has to be a mage. You want to keep drawing in those apostates, while the Chantry's got its pants down."

"Really!" Leliana protested.

Carver grinned, but then said, "Why not a lottery? Leave it to the Maker... or the Ancestors, or the Creators... or to Fate. A lottery for the mages and a lottery for each race of warriors. At least four. Put the best of them in charge."

"In Jader," Danith said slowly, "it would be wise for a

human – and not a mage – to be called leader.”

The other looked at her in amazement, but she held her ground. “Whoever is in command will have to deal with the leaders of this city: with the head priest and the steward... perhaps with others in power. They will be more likely to deal fairly with another human. It is the practical solution. And it should definitely not be a mage.”

“Wisely spoken,” Bronwyn said, pleasantly surprised at Danith’s clear-eyed appraisal of their situation. “In the end, it might also depend on the relative abilities of those chosen. But I think a lottery is for the best, and the method least likely to cause hard feelings.”

The lottery was held immediately. While there were no tears, there was no celebration either. Petra, for the mages; Catriona, for the humans; Askil, for the dwarves, and Ailill for the elves. The – winners? – losers? – resigned themselves to their fate, listened quietly to Bronwyn’s briefing as to their duties, and agreed that they would be staying at the Grey Warden compound.

Petra, who already had a room there, put a very good face on her feelings. “It’s very nice. We’ll all be very comfortable there. It has excellent facilities for training and recruiting.”

Bronwyn was thinking rapidly. She did not know Catriona very well, but Tara and Brosca thought highly of her. Very likely, she would perform adequately as leader, though Loghain had mentioned that the archer had little use for the Chantry. That would have to be downplayed.

She would have a private word with Catriona. The woman seemed downcast at the prospect of bidding farewell to her friends, but there were no tears or recriminations.

Askil was clearly not pleased, but Astrid, who had led him in the past few months, clapped a hand on his shoulder and said something in his ear. He nodded, took a deep breath, and seemed to accept his fate.

Ailill was not at all happy at the outcome. He had spent a long, unpleasant period underground in Orzammar and the Deep Roads, and had been looking forward to an adventure with his people. The Dalish crowded around him, whispering. To Bronwyn’s surprise, Tara joined them. Ailill listened to them, bit his lip, and seemed in better spirits.

Bronwyn could not guess what was behind these stoic masks. If she had, she might have been offended, or disapproving, or even sympathetic. She also would have been reassured that all of them accepted their situation and even saw certain advantages in it.

Petra had resigned herself to a hideous experience in the course of which she would probably be horribly killed. She had no great opinion of her own combat skills. Going west did not sound glorious to her; it sounded like a death sentence for most. At worst there was the horror of capture rather than death. It would not do to show her relief, but in fact, she felt like one who had been pardoned at the foot of the gallows. She was an experienced teacher: she could spot talent, and would be glad to do her part in

recruiting and training. All things considered, she felt she would be more effective here than she would in the west.

Askil regarded himself as Astrid's loyal retainer. She had quickly pointed out to him how well he could serve her here in Jader, so close to Orzammar. Here, he could keep his finger on the pulse of the dwarven kingdom. He could send her messages, and relay word from her to her friends. In fact, from Astrid's point of view, the choice was ideal for her purposes. Askil took a great deal of comfort from that. He, too, would recruit: the best possible candidates to support his Paragon.

Ailill, too, had taken comfort in his friend's words. There was so much he could do here to help his fellow elves. First of all, he could guard the eluvian. It would be quickly moved to the Wardens' Compound and put under barrier enchantments. Furthermore, more Dalish might well be arriving; travelers from distant clans. It was imperative that someone be here to make them welcome and to share certain facts with their Keepers. Then too, there was good he could do in the Alienage, and elves who could be won away from wage-slavery and squalor. It would also be a way to keep the fact of the Dalish role in the alliance visible to the shemlens.

Catriona's feelings were the most confused. She did not fear combat. She did not fear darkspawn. If taken, she had ways of ending herself quickly. That was a consideration, after all, even if taken by other humans. The things she feared in life were other than death: she feared being crippled and becom-

ing a burden to her family; she feared leaving her brother and his children to misery and starvation. She had recently sent him a large amount of coin, but she knew how quickly the needs of young children could swallow it up. Her brother was not well. If he died, his children — all under twelve — would be left to the mercy of neighbors and the Chantry, and Catriona had no confidence in either.

She had been toying with the idea of contacting Jem and telling him to move to Soldier's Peak outright. If she was going to be in Jader for some time, though, she might ask him to come here instead. She had looked into the matter: it was not all that unusual for a Jader Warden to get employment for their relatives, and the Compound was short of help at the moment, with the departure of Riordan's Wardens and much of their support staff. The more she thought about it, the better she liked the idea, and the more she wondered if the Maker weren't finally giving her a huge leg up in life.

The Kinloch Hold Circle contingent arrived at Jader, last of all the allies, and discovered it had nearly missed the war. The army was forming up to march out, and a harried marshal found a place for them in the long column. There was only time to rest the animals and swallow a meal before they would be leaving.

Many of the mages had never seen a city — or did not remember seeing a city — and those who had certainly had never seen a city like Jader. They were lucky in the

weather the day they arrived, and could walk beside their supply wagons, eagerly taking in the sights.

Most of the Templars had never been out of Ferelden, and were open in their admiration as well, noting down places they would like to visit at more length someday.

And no one would ever see it more splendid than it was today, as the army of the alliance against the Blight prepared to go to war. A rainbow of heraldry burst forth on shields, banners, and pennants; every color, every creature, every symbol was represented. Orlesian heraldry was far more complex than Ferelden: where a noble Fereldan house might be symbolized by a bear or a bull or a raven, Orlesians had made an art and a science of heraldry; the complex symbols telling the story of their families' bloodlines for generations.

Shields were divided by fesses, by pales, by saltires, and crosses, and chevrons. They were parted by bends, and those of bastards were marked with the bend sinister. Shields were marshaled or quartered, all painted with all the traditional tinctures: gules, sable, purpure, argent, azure, and or. Chevaliers bore elaborate crests on their helmets. Distant members of the same clan differenced their arms with individual cadences: crescents, mullets, marlets, annulets, and roses. It made a brave display. Fereldans studied these works of art with admiration and envy.

Greagoir had visited Val Royeaux years before, traveling by ship from Amaranthine. Irving had seen Cumberland.

Both were greater cities than Jader, but Jader was really quite beautiful and distinctive and well worth a look. A pity they would not have chance to explore the city.

They were received courteously by the King and Queen, but the conversation was not a long one, for everyone was incredibly busy. Both the Knight-Commander and the First Enchanter were taken aback when the Queen thanked them for anticipating her needs, and announced she was conscripting ten mages and two Templars.

"Not instantly, of course," she said, smiling. "But in the next day or so. Think about whom you think would do best."

Greagoir swallowed a remark that after what happened to Cullen he had no desire to give a Templar to the Grey Wardens ever again. Irving's smile was a bit forced. They bowed away from the frenzy surrounding the command group, accepted the place they were assigned in the order of march, and hoped that the Queen would forget about them.

There were disputes over precedence among the Orlesians: fists were shaken and insults were exchanged. Bann Cauthrien, riding down the column, shouted at the fools to get into line.

"Find a place! Get in anywhere you bloody well can! This isn't a tournament! Don't you know we're at war?"

The disputants were silenced, but vowed revenge on each other at some future date. Or at least that they would slip into line ahead of their rivals at the next stop.

At long last, it was time to go. The Revered Mother stood on

the steps of the Chantry and held up her hand in benediction:

"Maker watch over and bless all people and creatures engaged in this noble enterprise: humans, elves, and dwarves alike; may He bless the horses that carry them and the oxen that pull the wagons. May he bless the brave dogs who fight loyally beside their masters –"

Scout was pleased at this, and flicked a glance up at Bronwyn, panting happily.

"Bless the King and Queen, and give them the wisdom and courage to lead us to victory. Bless the nobles with daring and prudence alike, and the officers with initiative and good sense. Bless all our soldiers with the spirit of endurance and loyalty, and keep them from harm. In the name of the Maker and His Prophet Andraste, so let it be."

She knew how to project her voice, and so many people crammed into Emerald Square heard her. Blessings were echoed and repeated, a deep reverent ocean of sound.

Bronwyn unslung the gold-fitted dragon horn, the trophy from her fight for the Ashes, and lifted it to her lips. She sounded it; and the music filled the square and rang through the streets. As the notes died away, army buglers took the cue to ring out the order to march.

Side by side, Bronwyn and Loghain rode through the square and into the Golden Road, their horses trampling early flowers and pine branches flung there by their subjects. Their dogs were beside them, wearing heavy studded collars, happy to be going on a long, long walk. Behind

them were Wardens, golems, knights, men-at-arms, a few volunteer companies of militia, including a determined little band of Jader elves, armed only with knives and carrying simple red banners. The earth trembled underfoot.

They were watched by the entire population of Jader, high and low. The Wardens remaining saluted them from the palace steps. A little higher on the steps, the princesses, gloriously dressed, bade farewell to the King and Queen, to Duke Prosper, to Arl Alistair, to Arls Corbus and Wulffe, to dear Warden Leliana, and all the others they had met in the course of their strange adventures.

"It will be dull without them," said Eglantine, waving her handkerchief.

"Very dull," agreed Eponine. "Who knows when we shall see them again?"

Celandine said nothing, not thinking that living in the beautiful palace of Jader was a dull thing at all. There were pleasant people to talk to, and new books to read. There would be company to dine with, and the palace gardens were large and lovely. She was rather afraid of Duke Prosper, and could wait perfectly well for him to return. The Queen had found a lady to act as their chaperone: a noblewoman of Jader whose younger brother had high hopes of royal generosity if he served well in the campaign. Lady Felice was pleasant enough, and knew all the gossip and some new embroidery stitches.

The army picked up more units as it passed the bar-

racks. More yet joined outside the city, where some of the local lords had encamped with their levies, and where the Dalish awaited them. There too, was the big cage on wheels, which gave the entire procession a carnival air; the big cage that carried the wyvern Leopold. The Revered Mother had not mentioned him by name, but under the general grouping of "creatures," he could be said to be traveling under the Maker's blessing.

"She didn't bless the mages," Anders snarked.

"She blessed all the humans and elves," said Carver. "Therefore, she blessed the mages, since they are human or elf. She didn't bless all bearers of greatswords, either. Or all archers."

"It would have been nice if she had," Nevin muttered.

Their first stop, of course, would be Chateau — no, *Castle Solidor*. It was little over a half-day's journey, but it gave them to chance to shake out problems with their marching order; with teams, with wheels, with loads, with proximity to rivals and enemies, with supply wagon distribution.

The new Wardens marched with their comrades, but were sheltered in between the veterans. Astrid, Tara, and Danith had assigned a mentor to all the recruits, partly to orient them, but mostly to keep an eye on them and make sure they did not get into fights with other units, or run away.

Silas Corthwaite had decided to stay with the Warden party. He had passed on his messages as instructed, and did not want to be left out of what was certain to be the great-

est struggle in many ages. Every sword was needed: even his own. He could see no justification whatever in keeping safe in Denerim. If anything, he wanted to go back to Val Royeaux and see if there was anything left to salvage, any survivors to rescue. And it was good to be traveling with Leliana again. He had almost forgotten what a wonderful companion she was.

Fenris, too, wanted to be a part of this. He had never been part of anything greater than himself, really; never before had comrades or friends. He felt almost like an elven knight of old, well-armed, well-armored, astride his own horse, going to face the greatest evil of the age. Even the mages seemed ennobled by the order they served. These were good people, under good leaders, and that was a new and splendid thing in Fenris' experience. Carver had dropped a few hints that the only hope of someone infected with darkspawn Taint was to become a Grey Warden. Infection was fairly likely, once they came to grips with the monsters. If that was what it took, Fenris had no fear of it. In fact, perhaps it would be for the best. Danarius could never claim a Grey Warden.

Where was Danarius? Probably hiding in Minrathous, as far from the Blight as possible. Fenris knew enough about his former master to understand that he was essentially a coward, hiding behind his magic, hiding behind his position, hiding behind his slaves and the weight and power of custom and political institutions. However rare and valuable Fenris was, Danarius would rate his life as

far more valuable, and would do nothing to risk it.

"If I did decide to be a Warden..." he murmured.

Carver's head swiveled in his direction, and the young man's face lit in a smile.

"Then you'd be making a very good choice. Talk to Bronwyn. I'm sure she'd be glad if you did."

"I could hardly approach the Queen — "

"Of course you could. I'll come with you, if you like. We'll be having a Joining soon for the new people. Or maybe you could have a private Joining first. Think it over." He turned in his saddle, and whispered loudly to Jowan.

"Fenris is thinking about Joining!"

"You should," Jowan said seriously. "You really should. You'll never have an opportunity to do something more important."

Fenris mulled that over, as Solidor grew closer. Would he make this commitment? It was a serious, life-long one. Perhaps nobles like the Queen and Alistair could find a way to slip the leash, but clearly, for everyone else, once a Warden, always a Warden.

Brosca was enjoying the trip, sitting next to Torvald in one of the Wardens' supply wagons. This was the one with all sorts of dangerous bombs, grenades, and poisons in it, so it was important to keep it well guarded.

"I think a second set of gears would make all the difference, only smaller ones. I can machine them and try a new prototype — "

Torvald was babbling happily about the Airbows, and how he was working on them and learning all about them. Brosca let him babble, happy that he was happy.

He was a nice guy. Brosca had not met many before, especially in her Orzammar days. Orzammar didn't breed "nice."

Other than in the Wardens. Most of the Wardens actually were nice guys. Maybe it was Bronwyn's influence. She was nice herself, and expected everybody to be the same. It smoothed life's rough edges away, sort of. The ones who weren't nice, like that Walther, had had their comeuppance, right enough.

And Brosca had been honest with Torvald. She had told him upfront about her Warden sweetheart who died. As time had passed, Brosca's conviction that she and Cullen had been a couple had hardened into unquestionable past history. They would still have been together, if the dragon hadn't got him. She had a keepsake, and a sweet memory of kissing him, and he was enshrined in her heart as The One.

But of course, life went on, and there was no reason not to enjoy the company of a nice guy. A nice, *dwarven* guy. And Torvald really respected her because she was a Warden. That was new and refreshing. Not many people had ever *respected* her. Respect was a heady brew.

Adaia was in the back of the wagon with Siofranni, their legs dangling over the end. It was a fine day for a journey, and fun to see the rest of the host behind them,

the shem knights eating their dust.

"I hope we can settle the Archdemon soon," she croaked to Siofranni, squeezing her hand. "I've got scores to settle before we can take off for... *you* know where. We're going to be rich by the time this is over... rich enough to *buy* a ship if we like instead of hiring one. I don't want to leave anybody in an Alienage ever again. I don't want to ever live in an Alienage myself. I know I owe Bronwyn, but once the Archdemon is dead and the Blight's over, I reckon we're square."

Siofranni agreed. "I thought it was beautiful, the place beyond the eluvian. I love civilization. I love baths and real soap. I like to wear silk dresses at dinner. I'm proud to be Dalish, yes, but everything is just so hard *all the time*."

"I like civilization, too, when I'm on top," Adaia said wryly. "On the bottom of the heap, not so much. As far as I'm concerned, the Tevinters can learn to cook their own food and wash their own clothes. They can learn to use their magic for that. I want to get our people out, and safe. Then we're leaving. We'll get on our ship and sail down the coast, away from the shemlen cities. We'll pass on through to our new home and leave all this behind without a regret."

"As long as I can have a bath – "

"–With real soap," Adaia finished for her, laughing. "Those elves looked pretty clean to me!"



It was good to march beside the aravels, good to be near the halla, good to be surrounded by elvhen kin. Danith

strode along, glad to be out of the green city. It was better here, marching on the road, breathing the scent of fresh young leaves, in the company of her friends. The Dalish Wardens were a clan to themselves, close as brothers and sisters by blood, which they were... in a way.

What would come of this war with the darkspawn? Four times the darkspawn had risen, and each time the Grey Wardens had defeated them and beaten them back into the Deep Roads. Danith felt in her heart that it would be so once more. There was nothing the Archdemon could attack them with that they could not defeat.

But how long would it take? Other Blights had lasted for decades, slipping over the limits of one age and spilling into another. Many had died, many had been Tainted, and much must have been lost.

The Dales had been lost, for example, over a bitter quarrel over strategy and alliance during the Second Blight. The shemlens had nursed a grudge because the elves had not come to their aid when demanded, and had retaliated by the destruction of the lands given to the elves by the word of the Prophet Andraste.

And now Bronwyn had come, like a second Andraste, offering the elves a home once more. How long would that last? Certainly as long as Bronwyn lived – as long as Loghain lived, too – but then the old quarrels would rise, and the humans would want all the Brecilian Forest for themselves. It would surprise them, would it not, if

they came to make war and found the land empty and deserted? That was the ending Danith hoped for. And yet...

What she had seen beyond the eluvian was beautiful and rich, but it was not Dalish. If she wished to be Dalish she must remain in Thedas. She saw little to suggest that the Dalish customs and traditions would be welcome or even understood. Those elegant, civilized people... what did they know of *Vir Tanadahl*, of the hard, clean life of the forest? It would seem to them alien, barbaric... or simply quaint.

What could she hope for herself? She was a Warden, bound to the Tainted underbelly of Thedas. Would the Taint sing to her in her sleep in that land far away? Or would it be muted, diminished, even silent? Could she learn to adapt to a new world, among those strangers with elven faces?

Nuala was looking at her, concerned. Danith managed a smile for her and marched on.

"Falkor, move those engineers into the wagons with the ballistae," Astrid ordered. "Just a few with every one of the wagons. If something happens, I want them to be able to get them down and assembled *fast*."

"Yes, Paragon."

Life was good. Astrid was building up her personal force of dwarf Wardens and binding the dwarven army closer to her with every day. Let Bhelen play politics from the safety of the Assembly. If her plans worked out, he and the deshyrs would be irrelevant in the wider scheme of things. Then,

too, Astrid was determined that Orzammar would have a permanent force of Wardens of its own. It was absurd that there was no Warden base in dwarven lands.

She flexed her elbow, adjusting the harness of her golden hand. It was a constant reminder of all that Bhelen's scheming had cost her: family, friends, the throne itself. Her hand could not be replaced, but when the Blight was over and won, not even the crown would be beyond her reach. It would be some... compensation.

She glanced to the side and saw Alistair chatting with Emrys. Praise the Ancestors that she had avoided *that* entanglement! She had been lonely; she had been at loose ends. Believing that she had a future only in the Grey Wardens, she had been ready to make the best of it, by connecting herself to the powers within it.

What an escape! For both of them, really. Alistair was doing quite well for himself – despite himself – as a human noble. He was betrothed to the insipid little Orlesian, who would simper and smile, and tell him how wonderful he was. Just what he needed. What he did *not* need was a relationship with a dwarf, however well-born.

Conversely, if she had burdened herself with a human husband, the chances of being declared a Paragon might have been seriously compromised. Mixed marriages were unacceptable in Orzammar. And imagine the scandal had she produced a human child! Of course that was unlikely, with Morrigan going about, dispensing contraceptive tea

like a noble giving alms.

Astrid laughed to herself, and speculated on an acceptable consort, once she herself was Queen of Orzammar. She noticed— but chose to loftily ignore— Oghren's jaundiced reactions to her schemes. He was very loyal to Bronwyn and was not part of Astrid's personal coterie. If that was his choice, so be it. She hoped he liked the surface.

"You ride well," Zevran complimented Tara, with measured praise. "There was a time, *cara mia*, that you were... shall we say 'not so good,' but you have learned. You ride well, and appear to great advantage on horseback."

Tara smiled at him, enjoying the day. Zevran appeared to great advantage at the moment himself. The loot they had won had allowed them to buy the very best in gear and accoutrements. Handsome armor that *fit*; soft leggings and the finest boots. People sometimes looked twice at them, thinking them short humans at first by their expensive garb. And no one, not knowing them well, could tell that Tara was a mage. She promised herself that she would never wear robes again.

Robes were strange and ugly garb. She thought that even most Tevinter robes she had seen in books were fairly ugly. Bizarre, too. Obviously, there were traditional elements, and then there were details that were meant to provide some sort of protection, like the odd metal plaques placed over women's abdomens. That dated from a time

when magic was held to damage the unborn. If that was so, why did only female *mages* wear them?

Actually, most robes were archaic versions of noble clothing of different places and periods, ossified by custom and Circle bureaucracy into official wear. Some were enchanted, true, but mostly they were inconvenient and uncomfortable — all designed to mark a mage and make it difficult to run away. Almost any other garb was better. As a Warden, she could afford the best.

She had never had so much as now; now when they were about to hazard all.

"Zevran," she began, and hesitated.

"What is it, my dear one?"

"Do you ever consider just... chucking it all and running off?"

"Always, but only with you."

"Sometimes I do. I just want this to be over. I wouldn't really run away, but I'd like to. Have you thought about what it would be like to live in a place where being an elf is *normal*? Where everybody is an elf?"

Zevran's golden face contracted in thought. "I have. You must understand, *bella*, that I have a more cautious view of most people's motives than you. This place we have seen... yes, it is beautiful... yes, we were greeted in friendship. But where there are no humans or dwarves, elves will find things among themselves to divide them. People are like that. The blue-eyed will despise those whose eyes are brown. The brunettes might look down upon the blonds.

Those with certain talents will be lauded; those without will form the underclass."

"They don't say it was like that in ancient Arlathan. They say it was perfect there."

Zevran's smile was a study in skepticism. "So they say. But who knows? Perhaps it was a paradise indeed for the great lords of the elven realm. If I may ask, however — who cooked the meals? Who grew the crops? Who gathered the fuel or cared for their beasts? I find it impossible to believe that there were no gradations in class or status. To do so would be contrary to all that I have observed. Everywhere, at every time, there are hewers of wood and drawers of water. These hewers and drawers might be slaves in one place, or contented free workers in another; but nowhere are all equal, because all are not equal in ability, in looks, in cleverness, in..." he shrugged, "mere luck. We know very little about those strangers. What little we know is good, and better than what we know about Thedas. I simply point out that there are always dark sides to everything. Even the sun cannot shine upon us constantly."

Tara considered that. "Sometimes I wonder what we will do there. Surely we'll have to do something useful."

"With your great command of magic, you will always be useful. Also decorative."

"Decorative, yourself!" She laughed. "It'll be... different."

"Indeed. I wonder how I shall come to be considered useful. My only skills lie in killing people in various ways,

and in making myself agreeable."

"Those are pretty impressive skills. Especially the second."

Loghain swore that if one more swaggering young Orlesian tried to flirt with Bronwyn, he would call the impudent pup out, hack him apart, and toss his bits to the dogs. He had seen Fereldan noblemen swagger and strut for the benefit of ladies, but he had never in his life seen such goings-on as among these half-women.

You would think this was a party, for the chevaliers were dressed in silk tabards over their armor, their eyes painted, their tresses curled. Squires carried their ridiculous beplumed and beribboned helmets, crested with dragons, with lions, with bereskarns, with sea monsters. They reeked of perfume, and batted their unnaturally long lashes at the Queen, turning this way and that so the sun would reflect off their armor just so. Preening pillocks. He was sending them in as the vanguard. Let them flirt with the darkspawn.

Val Chevin was dying. Hector Pentaghast acknowledged it, even though he was glad that the Wardens' holding action had enabled much of the population to escape. They had been ferried away by sea, since the docks were still under their control. The poor souls would be conveyed to any place that would take them in. It was inevitable that Cumberland would shut its gates to the refugees when the

press of them became unbearable. The ships would then go further along the coast: most north to Kirkwall, to Ostwick, perhaps to the thinly populated islands of the Archipelago; a few would go south, dropping off the survivors at Jader and at various places along the Fereldan coast. No one would want to go on the south-bound ships except for the ones destined for Jader, fearing vengeful, savage Fereldans. Pentaghast had found the Fereldans he had met perfectly pleasant and civilized, if some of them were a bit young and unsophisticated. No doubt the Orlesians knew that Fereldans had little reason to love them after the long years of brutal occupation.

The darkspawn did not seem particularly interested in taking the city. However, they were leaching life from the fields and fouling the rivers. The big refugee camp to the north had pulled up stakes and headed off further north to Arlesans. Pentaghast had advised Revered Mother Dorothea to take them even further, perhaps toward Hunter Fell. He did not envy her the hardships ahead.

Inside the city, the wells still provided clean water, but anyone drinking or washing from the Chevin was almost certainly doomed to Blight disease. Pentaghast had conscripted many of the sick adults, but it was not a feasible solution for the very old and the very young. Oddly enough, he had tried the Joining on a Blighted young pregnant woman, and she had lived, with no detectable harm to the unborn child. Assigned to light duty in the kitchens, she was doing her part.

He had sent out scouts. Some had come back to report; others had been swallowed by the unknown. The darkspawn had diffused over a wide area. They had not reached Montfort, but no one had been able to get through to see if Val Foret still stood. He had sent a small ship south to the mouth of the river Orne, to see if anyone could manage the half-day's march between the river and Val Foret. Another of the ships he had sent would go to Highever, to send a message to the Fereldans about his movements. Even if the Fereldans hated Orlais, they must know that time was of the essence.

The Archdemon, for some reason, had not returned. If it did, and it burned the docks, it would no longer be possible to supply Val Chevin by sea. And yet, this delay... this stalemate was entirely in the Archdemon's favor. Pentaghast needed more men. He needed more Wardens. Where were they?

To be fair, they could only travel so fast, and so even had they left immediately, they would still be days away. Weisshaupt was the closest on the Imperial Highway, and it was from the Wardens of the Anderfels that Pentaghast hoped for relief.

Reinhard Wildauer, First Warden of Thedas, was beyond exasperated. "Another brawl?"

"I'm afraid so, First Warden. And it's going to get worse. The Templars are furious."

Wildauer was already worn out by the time he reached Cumberland. Simply mediating the growing, burning hostility between his own Wardens of the Anderfels and the Tevinter

contingent was taking entirely too much time and energy. And that was not to mention the hostility that the Tevinters were provoking in the cities along the Imperial Highway.

The Tevinters boasted a huge proportion of mages: very powerful, aggressive mages, who had not been humbled by years of living in a Circle or being on the run from the Templars. Some of the Tevinter mage Wardens were members of prominent families, and very well-connected, indeed. Some were apostates, escaped from the lands of the White Chantry and recruited into the privileged status of Tevinter Grey Warden mage. These were especially vocal, arrogant, and deplorably self-satisfied. Their attitude was infecting the Circle mages who were traveling with his own Wardens. It was infecting the Anderfel mage Wardens themselves.

And so many mages, strutting openly in the streets of Gallisa, of Theordis, of Parrhae, and now in Cumberland itself was deemed an affront to the Chantry. Everywhere, one saw the Templars attempting to challenge mages on the street, only to be told by the mages that they were Grey Wardens and not under Chantry authority. Sometimes that worked. Sometimes the Templars pointed out the complete lack of Warden insignia. For that matter, quite a few mages claiming to be Wardens were not. If they tried that, and a Warden was present, the First Warden had ordered that they be taken into custody by the Wardens —by any means necessary — and forcibly conscripted. If they wanted to play at being Wardens, then by the Maker, they would be War-

dens. He had picked up quite a few apostates in this fashion.

Some had run away; some had not, glad of a meal and the Wardens' protection.

Then there was the problem of the Tevinter baggage train. Many of the servitors were slaves, and some had fled into the anonymity of Nevarran cities. The Tevinters had protested furiously. The Nevarrans were put in an unpleasant position, but few Watchmen would arrest a slave. The Tevinters mostly relied on bounty hunters, and those always spelled trouble.

Quarrels, back-biting and all, the Wardens had been made welcome in the Prince's city of Cumberland, and told something of what the Nevarran Wardens were facing. A pair of Wardens had ridden in hard, evading the darkspawn, all the way from Val Chevin to give a report, and to ask for more support from the Nevarran royal army. The Prince invited the First Warden to the meeting. The two Wardens, a man and a woman named Borthus and Athis, made a good impression on all the notables.

"No one's really got past the darkspawn screening Val Foret and lived to tell about it. We don't know if the city has fallen or not. We don't even know if they've been attacked. For all we know, the Archdemon might have led the horde south, west, or east. In the old days, we could have ridden griffons high above and seen the movements from the air. For now, we're fighting blind."

"We live in the world as it is, and we must work with what



THE RED QUEEN

we have," Wildauer said stiffly. He hated to be reminded of griffons. Any mention of them made him feel mildly defensive. The creatures were dead and gone, and it was not his fault, but that of a long-dead predecessor, who had cut costs with foolish economy. Or perhaps it was a disease spread by the Qunari. There were various theories, all now of academic interest only. Whatever had happened was all blood under the bridge now. Grey Warden scouts must see the world as ordinary mortals these days: from the ground.

"Is there any word from the Fereldans?" Borthus asked outright. The First Warden was puzzled, but Prince Tylus could make that clear.

"We have heard that Commander Bronwyn — now Queen Bronwyn — means to lead her coalition of dwarves, Dalish, and Fereldans west into Orlais in pursuit of the horde. Very dutiful of her. The country, of course, is leaderless and in turmoil. We understand that a number of high Orlesian nobles have joined under her banner, including Duke Prosper de Montfort. We don't know where Queen Bronwyn is at the moment, but at least she means to provide us with a second front."

Wildauer snorted his dismissal of that crazy barbarian girl, but the Prince of Cumberland gave his due to his new Fereldan allies.

"Very good of her," he said feelingly. "If someone doesn't stop or distract the darkspawn, we could have them in Cumberland before Summerday!"



THE RED QUEEN

The Alliance stood at the Frostback Gates at Solidor, and for a moment, everyone took a deep breath before undertaking the march to challenge the Archdemon.

With the mountains at their backs, the green fields of Orlais spread out before them, rolling and lush in spring-time garb. In the distance lay the Halamshiral Hills, and further on, under the vault of heaven, lay their destiny.

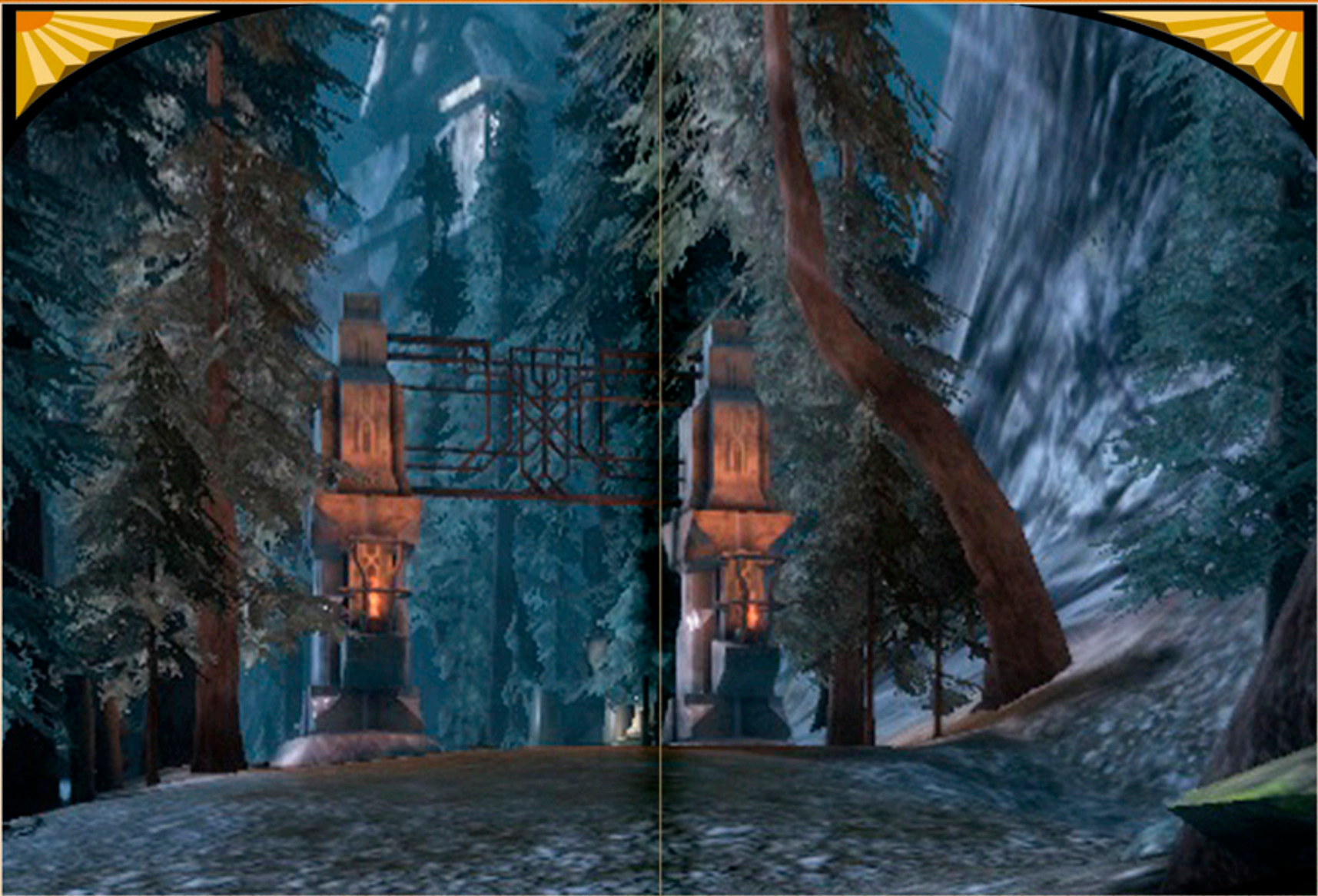
Bronwyn saw the look on Loghain's face, and found it impossible not to tease him.

"It's only Orlais. You're not invading the Black City!"

He snorted, a gloomy sort of laugh. "There's not much to choose between them, for that matter!" He gazed at the fair country before him, and said, "I never thought I would set foot in Orlais, unless it was as a captive being taken to torture and execution. Only you could persuade me to step over this border."

Now she laughed in her turn, and quoted a children's geography, learned by rote under old Aldous' tutelage. "*The Orlesians are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines.*"

"And with the addition of masks, daggers in the back, poison in the cup, ridiculous clothes, and intolerable arrogance, you have a fairly good picture of our new allies. Maker help us."



THE FROSTBACK GATE



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CHAPTER 15

OVER THE
HILLS AND
FAR AWAY

WITH THE ORLESIAN FLEET DESTROYED, ISABELA WAS EAGER TO PUT TO SEA AGAIN. Partying in Highever was great fun,

but nothing compared with a deck under her feet and the winds whipping through her hair. She had a little flotilla of her own now, and was a power to be reckoned with in these waters. And so, she stood at the helm of THE SIREN'S CALL, contemplating her options.

Obviously, she couldn't bite the hand that fed her, so to speak, so Fereldan ships were safe. Everyone else, however, was fair game...

There was Kirkwall shipping, and Ostwick shipping, and heaps of other wallowing merchantmen that would be ripe for plucking. There were also the rogue vessels of the Felicisima Armada, which were the enemies of all. They were harder nuts to crack, but always full of yummy golden goodness inside.

Theoretically, she was under orders to protect the Fereldan north coast, which now extended all the way to Jader,

but that could be achieved perfectly well with some serious patrolling of this end of the Waking Sea. If she just happened to spot a desirable prize, it could be justified as necessary training for the lads to keep their hand in.

Her biggest prize, the Orlesian warship, EMPRESS AREA, was still in drydock being repaired. Isabela was going to rename it, of course, since she thought the first Orlesian empress' name was terribly silly. It would be her flagship, eventually, with the loveliest, most luxurious stern cabin imaginable, and, in the right hands, the potential for maneuverability that would make an old salt weep. Isabela herself was the model for the figurehead at the bow.

"Hmmm. What's in a name?... 'TERROR' is always nice, but maybe a little generic," she considered. "'PEARL OF THE WAKING SEA'... 'THE BLACK PEARL'... or just 'THE PEARL'... hmmm... good times there. 'THE REVENGE?' 'ISABELA'S REVENGE?' 'THE BEST REVENGE?'... I rather like that one... Or maybe something patriotic? 'THE RED QUEEN'... 'THE DRAGON QUEEN'... Not 'THE GIRL WARDEN!' That sounds too goody-goody for words. Nothing about dogs, and nothing about land battles. Boring. 'RED QUEEN' really isn't bad, and who's to say which queen I mean? I could commission red sails! That would be very impressive."

A mist fell at evening, cool and white. Visibility diminished to almost nothing. The lookout aloft was alert for gathering storms and other vessels.

"To starboard!" he shouted. "Captain! I think it's a Qunari

dreadnought!"

This created something of an alarm. The rest of the crew on deck rushed to the rail to see.

"Shit!" growled Isabela, forsaking all daydreams instantly. "Show me!"

Some big was moving fast off their starboard side. Something quite a bit bigger than the SIREN'S CALL.

"Battlestations, Captain?"

"Oh, yes, but quietly."

"We're not going to try to take them on?" squeaked her nice new elven mage.

"I don't see how that could be a good idea, Sketch," she replied. "But if they put the moves on us, we'll bloody well fight back!"

But the big deadnought was not interested in engaging the *bas*. Its commander, called Karasten — for that was his rank as a commander — was in the Waking Sea to investigate the report of the destruction of the city of Val Royeaux. He had been given a well-equipped force and a large dreadnought. His mission was to gather intelligence and determine if it was, in fact, true. If so, was the land in such confusion that it might be ripe for the Qun?

There was another issue at stake. After the so-called "Exalted March," The Tome of Koslun had been kept by the *bas* in their city of Val Royeaux. The Llomeryn Accords, which had ended the war between the *bas* of the White Chantry and the Qunari, had decreed that the Tome of

Koslun was to be returned to the Qunari. It was a foundational work by their greatest philosopher. The Orlesians had proved dilatory, and the book had not yet been returned. If necessary, Karasten was to determine the feasibility of an expedition to penetrate into the city and seize the volume. If opportunity came his way, he was to use his best judgment and attempt to recover it himself. It was believed to be kept in the Grand Cathedral.

Last in priority was to obtain information about the scouting party sent to Ferelden under a Sten of the Bere-saad. The Sten's mission was to comprehend the nature of the Blight phenomenon and report to the Arishok, but no word had been heard of him. He was presumed dead, but those who knew him considered that particular Sten a resourceful soldier. Perhaps he was still gathering data, and had not yet found a way to return to Qunandar.

So Karasten and his dreadnought slipped past the Narrows, and entered the western portion of the Waking Sea. The ship was in good condition. They had watered first on the little island of Estwatch, and then again on the Wounded Coast, not far from Kirkwall. This had given Tallis, a member of the Ben-Hassrath traveling with them, the chance to make a brief reconnaissance of the city, for purposes she did not divulge. They had also undertaken some repairs there. Presumably there would be considerable traffic on the seas near Val Royeaux. Though the darkspawn were considered dangerous, they could not

affect the ship in any way. According to intelligence, they could not even swim. The dreadnought would provide a secure base for their explorations.

Isabela followed the ship for some time, keeping her distance, hoping they would not take offense and come about for an attack. The dreadnought was hugging the northern coast, and appeared to be heading for Cumberland, so she turned aside at last, and followed a new heading to Jader, just to let the Powers That Be know that a Qunari vessel was in the neighborhood.

Karasten was informed that the pursuing vessel had dropped out of sight. He merely grunted. Only a fool would attack a Qunari dreadnought, armed as it was with twenty cannon on each side, each capable of firing a twenty-pound ball. Gaatlok was the great secret of the Qunari, and a defense against the *bas*. Once into the harbor of Val Royeaux, they could bombard the city prior to making a landing.

Their water tanks were deep, and Qunari could go without water for some time. Karasten had determined that they would make no more stops until they reached Val Royeaux. Surprise could be of paramount importance. They knew little about the darkspawn, but warning an enemy of one's arrival was never prudent.

In three days, they entered Val Royeaux's excellent harbor. It was at the mouth of the River Royeaux, and a

superb deep water port. Still at some distance, Karasten surveyed the area through his spyglass. It bore all the marks of a devastating sack. Smoke rose lazily from the upper city. It appeared that part of the dockyards had also suffered a major fire.

There were no ships afloat in harbor. There were some half-submerged hulks, however. He must be vigilant for underwater hazards. Something had sunk a great many ships in the harbor, and the worthless *bas* had not cleared the wreckage. To be just, it could well be that there were no *bas* available. There were no signs of movement visible. Just to be on safe side, he gave the order to ready the port cannons.

He was approached by his second-in-command, First Sten. "Shall I ready a ship's boat for the scouting party, Karasten?" "Do so. It is clear that we will not be able to go much further into the harbor with so much debris."

The Ben-Hassrath, Tallis, came forward. As she was of the elven race, she was a tiny figure among the huge, horned warriors; but she carried authority with her, and all treated her with respect.

"I shall lead the scouting part myself. Expect me back before dark. That's when the darkspawn become active."

"As you wish, Ben-Hassrath."

Soundings were taken, and lookouts leaned over the water to watch for hidden dangers. With careful maneuvering, they were able to get a little closer before they were forced to drop anchor and launch the boat. First Sten

took the helm. Ten warriors joined him, and acted as oarsmen. One of the *saarebas* in the ship's complement was unchained from the rest and ordered into the boat. Tallis sat in the bow, scanning the ruined docks as the oarsmen brought them to a usable pier.

From the dreadnought, Karasten watched impassively, but his eyes missed nothing. In time, the landing party moved out of sight, making their way carefully through the ruins. Tallis had been provided with a reliable map of the city, though of course much would be altered with the manifest destruction before them. The darkspawn creatures appeared to be nothing if not thorough. Were they formidable opponents in themselves? That remained to be seen. He had read a book about the prior Blights during the voyage, but it seemed to be largely fictional. All of the myths and legends centered around creatures called Old Gods. It pointed up the primitive survivals of the cultures unenlightened by the Qun. According to the legends, then, these Blights were triggered by the release of an imprisoned Old God – a High Dragon – which was renamed an "Archdemon." This Archdemon led a horde of darkspawn to the surface for a lengthy rampage. There had been four such Blights, all ending when the Archdemon was slain. The last had ended two hundred years before the arrival of the Qunari.

Karasten had never seen a dragon himself, but he had read about them. Mature dragons were large and dangerous beasts, but were largely extinct, except on the border

of Nevarra and Orlais. High Dragons had not been seen in many ages, though there were rumors that the young Queen of Ferelden had slain one. *Bas* – their undisciplined minds untethered to reality – always exaggerated their deeds. That the reputed Dragonslayer was a female made the Qunari even more certain that this was an invention, or a metaphor for some sort of religious rite.

Time passed; Karasten made certain that the gunners remained at their posts, and that the hands were alert. He sent a second watch up into the crow's nest, so that none would grow weary and inattentive. A quick meal was brought to those at their posts, including himself. Karasten would not have his men distracted by hunger.

There was still no sign of movement in the dockyard buildings. As Tallis had said, it was known that these darkspawn creatures disliked sunlight and were more active at night.

He glanced at his own map, estimating distances. By now, if not hampered by collapsed buildings, Tallis and First Sten should be nearly at the site of the Grand Cathedral. An elevation drawing of the city indicated that the twin towers of the cathedral should be visible from the waterfront, but Karasten could make out only one. Evidently, the other had indeed fallen as reported.

That "report" was mysterious. It was utterly impossible that a messenger could have witnessed this event on the twenty-sixth of Guardian and reached Qunandar to report it. Yes, the report itself now appeared to be true, but how

was the message sent? Rumor had it that the Grey Warden had seen this attack in the Fade, but that seemed fantastical and foolish. Prophecy was mere superstition. It could be that the legendary sending stones of the elves were used. If so, someone must have more of the stones somewhere in Rivain. Karasten believed that an expedition was underway there to uncover their location. The locals could be made to talk with the right incentives. The Grey Warden post in Dairsmuid might be vulnerable to a well-planned raid, since many of them had departed to fight the Blight.

The Grey Wardens, too... Secret societies had no place in an efficiently administered polity. They did not respond to *qamek*, and when encountered fought creditably. They were rarely captured, and then little information could be got from them. It was generally best to simply kill them. The rest of Thedas seemed to put considerable faith in the notion that the Grey Wardens were the ones to deal with this "Blight." Why could not well-trained, well-motivated Qunari warriors do likewise? Indeed, why could they not do *better*?

The sun was sinking in the western sky, and the landing party had not yet returned. Karasten did not allow himself to worry. There was still plenty of time. In the best case scenario, Tallis was even now returning with the Tome of Koslun in her hands.

"Karasten!" shouted the lookout in the crow's nest, pointing. "Karasten! Something in the sky! It is not a cloud!"

The sky? Odd. No danger save bad weather could come from

the sky. A storm would be inconvenient. Karasten searched the skies, and then saw the curious little black dot. A bird?

He peered through the spyglass, and, involuntarily, he shuddered. No bird. A dragon, and apparently a large one. It was headed their way.

"Cannon crews stand by!" he shouted. Two points northwest, elevation forty-five degrees!"

The problem was, that the altitude was relative. As the dragon swooped closer, its position in the sky was revealed to be very far above them. With grim certainty, Karasten acknowledged that he was seeing a High Dragon, and that they were all in great danger.

"Karasten!" shouted a gunnery officer. "We cannot elevate the cannons any higher!"

"Weigh anchor!" Karasten shouted. "Hoist the mainsail!" The tide was coming out, which was in their favor. There was no lee wind to drive them aground. They might well need to stand out to sea. The dragon's flight toward them appeared to be deliberate.

Abruptly, it swooped to the ground, nearly disappearing for a moment, and then it soared almost vertically. Something was clutched in the front talons; something small and struggling that was carelessly released and fell a long way to the ground. Karasten looked through the spyglass again. He could not be sure, but wasn't that the *saarebas*? The dragon came on. Something on the ground was running toward the docks. The harness, the weapons! In front, the

tiny figure! They were definitely three of the landing party!

"Archers! Make ready!" He commanded. "Give cover!"

It was useless. Behind the running Qunari were a mob of monstrous creatures. These, then, were darkspawn. At first Karasten took them for dwarves by their size, but the run was a curious bandy-legged waddle; awkward-looking, but terribly fast. The fleeing Qunari were dragged down, and disappeared under the darkspawn. One – Tallis – had escaped them, and sprinted ahead of them to the pier. She dove into the water, and began striking out strongly for the ship. The darkspawn crowded at the docks, jeering. It was impossible to send a boat out for her. She would survive or not, on her own.

"Fire on the docks!" he commanded.

A great booming noise, and smoke filled the air. Cannonballs whistled through the air and exploded. Several were aimed well enough to blast the big knot of darkspawn apart. They killed their fellow Qunari as well. Perhaps it was a mercy.

The Archdemon roared, executing a complex, graceful maneuver in midair. The long neck swiveled toward the ship.

"Helmsman!" shouted Karasten. "Get us out of this harbor!" In a sudden burst of inspiration, he ordered, "Unchain the *Saarebas* and bring them up on deck." *Saarebas* were used on land, and cannon at sea. but magic could do what science could not, and fire a curse straight overhead. An officer went below decks to carry out the order.

Slowly, painfully slowly, the ship began inching away from the shores of Val Royeaux. Too slowly. The Archde-

mon seemed to hover briefly, and then climbed for altitude. Abruptly, it dropped, coming up fast on their stern.

"Archers! Loose!"

The feeble arrows were no more than straws in the wind against the armored hide of the Archdemon. The stern canon fired, but the trajectory of the cannonballs was hopelessly shallow.

The dragon had all the advantage. Its jaws gaped wide, and purple flames bloomed, scorching the dreadnought from stern to bowsprit, roasting most of those on deck who did not leap into the sea. The two *saarebas*, chained together, did not have time to gather their power or realize the source of the danger clearly. They were knocked over the side, and drowned, weighed down by their chains and iron collars. The dragon passed on, and pulled up. Tilting into a turn, it came back for another run. The sails were already aflame. It came down low, bellowing. Another blast of flame, and whole port side was burning.

The lifeboats on the starboard side and the number two collapsible boat were still usable. It would not take long for these flames to reach the *gaatlok* magazine.

"Abandon ship!"

The boats were launched, and the ship was evacuated. The Archdemon, mildly amused, watched them, coming in now and then to pick them off in the water.

The explosion took it entirely by surprise. A white light, bright as dragonfire, burst forth suddenly, and then there

were a thunderous succession of roars, so close together they seemed one. The deck of the ship seemed to detach, break up into a thousand piece, and fly up in the air. The shock wave caught the Archdemon in mid-flap before it was struck by a mass of debris. Wounded, it squealed in an earsplitting convulsion of pain, and sheered away, flying toward shore and its nest.

With immense effort, the collapsible boat was assembled and righted. Sharks took four of the men as they labored in the water. Burned and injured, fifteen survivors – including Karasten and the intrepid Tallis – rowed away from Val Royeaux in the sheltering darkness, heading south for the opposite coast of Orlais. Their destination was the mouth of the River Orne. Surely it was out of the flying range of the dragon.



The city of Halamshiral knew that the Red Queen was coming. Specifically, the Vicomte de Brangelome, the ruler of the city in the absence of its lord Duke Enguerrand, knew that the Alliance against the Blight was headed in his direction. The latter nobleman had been in Val Royeaux, and was very likely dead, but no one could be certain of that. He might well make an appearance eventually, and the Vicomte would have to account for his conduct to him.

Duke Prosper sent him a message, advising him that it would be wise – very wise – to open his gates to the Allied army and give them every assistance in his power.

“Let me put it this way, my friend. If you open your gates, the Fereldans will be gone within a day or so, on their way to fight the Archdemon in the west, which is something we would all like very much. If you defy the army, and close your gates, they are likely to set up camp outside your walls and lay siege to the city. That will be unpleasant – for you – and it will delay our campaign. I speak with the authority of Empress Celandine, the rightful heiress by blood.”

In the end, the Vicomte decided it was safer to open the gates than to hazard a siege. Halamshiral was packed with frightened refugees, and he had to keep the gates open, anyway, in order to keep the refugees flowing toward the Fereldan border.

As the army's path crossed with more refugees the stories grew wilder, more shocking, more violent. Some of the refugees were owning up to having been in the army the night it was destroyed by the Archdemon. One man was traveling with his brother, who was now blind from burns he had suffered. It was too late to cure his eyes, but the army mages could ease his pain. No one demanded that the two men somehow go back and fight. They had a little farm in the foothills of the Frostbacks, and were technically citizens of Ferelden now. Loghain sent a note with them to the castellan of Solidor to give them assistance, once he heard their whole story from beginning to end. The tale of the Archdemon's destruction of the Orlesian camp was an awful warning. He gave thought to how to keep watch for an airborne menace.

And in Halamshiral, they came across the first refugees who were obviously infected with Blight sickness. "Came across" was a mild, and thus inaccurate way to put it. Refugees, grey and blotchy with Taint, were discovered in the Market, and in a screaming panic, they were lynched and burned to death by a mob. Two guards were killed and three injured trying to stop the riot. The army stepped in, and it got very ugly very quickly.

Bronwyn eventually moved in with her Wardens, telling the people to stay in their homes, and that if anyone was infected with the Blight disease, to come to the Wardens. The disease, she said, could sometimes be cured by the Wardens, and the sooner they reported to them the better. A handful of people turned themselves in, and were seen no more by the citizens of Halamshiral. The Healers did what they could for them, but Bronwyn did not give much for the chances of any of them but one, a big, robust warrior, who might live long enough to face the darkspawn.

Prosper had also sent out an order of muster to the nobles of the Dales. It would take some time for it to reach many of them: the minor nobles at least, who were the backbone of the chevalier class. An audience was held, and some names were enrolled in the alliance. Some names were not, and Prosper noted those down for future retribution.

To say that Halamshiral left a bad taste in everyone's mouth was not overstating the matter. The Dalish found the city horrifying for complex historical reasons. This

had been the actual elven capital of the Dales, founded by the free elves who had been Andraste's loyal allies. "*The End of the Journey*," they had called it in their tongue.

"But it wasn't, was it?" Tara said bitterly. "A brief intermission at best, and now you couldn't tell it from any other human city. It even has an Alienage! How sick is that?"

"Calm yourself, *bella mia*," Zevran soothed her. "The world is the world."

"They should at least have changed the name. It's gloating and horrible," she muttered.

The Dalish hated it, too, looking almost in vain for traces of Elven architecture. It was all gone: either razed completely, or faced over with fresh stone. Only the arches over the gates showed something of the ancient grace, and there the inscriptions had been chiseled away, and replaced by terra cotta friezes of triumphant chevaliers.

"I hate this," Siofranni whispered to Danith, as they took their turns standing guard. The locals came to stare at them, talking loudly, as if the elves were deaf, or did not understand common speech.

"I hate it too, *lethallan*," Danith murmured back, "but we must bear it a little longer." In truth, it felt like they were miscreants, held up for the scorn of shemlen. It was just the sort of thing that made her question why she was risking her life for these awful people. She was not sure she could make Bronwyn understand, but she must try. Too much time in a place like this would shatter the allegiance of

the Dalish. There was too much history here; too much terrible history and too much present humiliation.

She went with some other elves – Adaia, Siofranni, and Cathair – to the Halamshiral Alienage. It was large and old – possibly the oldest Alienage in Thedas, since it was here that the first captive elves were rounded up after the fall of the Dales, and here that they were told that they were to serve their human masters thenceforth.

Some of the Jader elves came with them. Danith was far more accustomed to city elves now, and so was able to sense that these elves were more like Adaia Tabris than the usual run of 'flat ears.' They were outspoken and aggressive. They had had enough, but were not sure what their options were.

"One thing *is* sure," Adaia declared forcefully, in her low, croaking voice. "Bronwyn is the best friend the elves have had in ages... or that we're ever likely to have. Now's the time for change. The Orlesians are all running around in confusion. The elves are going to do their part by fighting against the Blight. But for those who can't fight, I'd advise moving out and going east. There's plenty of room in the new elven land in Fereldan. It would be safer, too."

"Some have talked about leaving the Alienage," the local hahren confessed. "The question always is: where would be better? Where could we go?"

Siofranni said, "It's better in the Elven Village. It's getting built up now, there in the land Bronwyn gave us. A

real elven town, with no shemlen to tell us what to do! We can give you a map. The Fereldan soldiers have been ordered not to mistreat elves. This may be the safest time ever for elves to travel."

"Yes," agreed Danith. "This is the time. Either the Blight will continue and the darkspawn will spread and the world will become more dangerous; or we will defeat the Blight, and a new shemlen ruler will take command here in Orlais. They will want to establish their authority, and they will tighten their grip on the elves."

The hahren could well see this. Once any rebuilding started, elves would be in demand for their cheap labor. If the shems feared losing such labor, travel would be restricted, as it often was. Right now, there were no restrictions, and the Vicomte had other things on his mind than the elves. In fact, he was glad for the refugees to be on their way. The hahren furrowed his brow in thought, making plans. The visitors could not know that he had long and bitter personal grievances against the rulers of Halamshiral, and would be glad to shake the dust of it from his feet.

"We can't all go at once. We'd be noticed. Groups can go, though; mixing in the rest of the refugees."

A Jader elf said, "And some of your young people should come with us! We're going to fight! We've sworn to follow Queen Bronwyn, and when she goes back to Ferelden, we'll be able to follow her there with the army. We could use more fighters."

"I'll go with you," a young woman said. "I'd rather fight dark-



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spawn for Queen Bronwyn than stay here. I hate this place.”

Bronwyn disliked Halamshiral herself.

“We’ve got to move on,” Bronwyn said to Loghain. “The elves are getting restless. Danith’s come to talk to me. The local humans are treating them badly.”

“Of course they’re restless,” Loghain agreed. He was restless himself. He was in a foreign city, and a foreign city not conquered by Ferelden. He was here as a guest, and being a guest of the Orlesians made him want to vomit up any and all comestibles they put before him. Everything felt wrong.

But they attended the Chantry service, where Bronwyn was made much of and Loghain glared at. That was bracing; that was something he could sink his teeth into. He didn’t mind being hated himself, as long as the bloody Orlesians hated only him, and would leave his people alone.

They collected what supplies they could, though they were probably taking food out of the mouths of refugees. More came to the city with each new day.

The main thing was to keep their communications open. Loghain sent back regular messages. An important one involved the fleet. They needed to move. Now that the Orlesian threat was at the bottom of the sea, he wanted some ships available: a squadron at Jader, and two or three at the port of Lydes, in case they had people to evacuate that he did not wish to leave to the kindness of the Orlesians along the Imperial Highway.



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More came to join the army, and one individual arrived who nearly caused the collapse of the alliance.

Boniface Clery was the grandson of a minor chevalier who had been killed at the Battle of River Dane, thirty-one years before. The death of Ser Laurence Clery had led to the subsequent impoverishment of the family, due to inheritance taxes and loss of patronage. Thirty years later, the son, the grandmother, the aunts and uncles and cousins were still sitting in the tiny unimproved manor left to them south of Halamshiral, not lifting a hand to better themselves – for that would mean soiling their hands and heritage with *trade* – but instead blaming the man they believed had ruined their lives. Their hatred for all things Fereldan was bitter and unrelenting. None of them had actually been to Ferelden or met a native of that country, but the word was synonymous with every evil under the sun.

When news came that their ancient enemy had dared to enter Orlais and put himself within reach of their revenge, every member of the family demanded that young Boniface uphold their honor by killing Loghain Mac Tir.

Did they not understand about the Blight? That was a question that was asked again and again later on. Had they not heard that the Empress was dead, killed by filthy darkspawn? Did they not grasp that their own lives could soon be in danger? If they did comprehend any of these things, apparently they had no importance in comparison

with their personal feud with the King of Ferelden, who did not even know of their existence.

Did they understand the political ramifications of such an assassination? That was difficult to say. It was clear that they believed that their cherished heir could kill a Fereldan without consequences.

It was easy enough to get close. The young man came on the pretext of doing homage on behalf of his father for their manor. It was an amusing ceremony. Ser Boniface was doing homage by proxy to Duke Prosper, who was accepting it as a proxy for Empress Celandine.

Loghain and Bronwyn were on their chairs of state nearby, acting as witnesses. Boniface of course recognized Loghain, who was probably one of the most recognizable men in Thedas, even if he had not been daily described to him as the personal enemy of the Clerys.

He was a good-looking young man, even if his clothes and armor were old-fashioned and his horse was of questionable quality. His fellow Orlesians sneered at him, but the Fereldan monarchs did not; nor, to his credit, did Prosper, who clearly understood the importance of every sword in the campaign. The young man dropped gracefully to one knee to offer homage, and rose, suddenly pivoting to the side, his dagger in his hand, launched toward Loghain.

What happened next was both embarrassing and nearly fatal — for the would-be assassin.

Loghain was alert, because he constantly expected

Orlesians to try to kill him. He was in armor, too; his trophy River Dane armor, not caring a particle if it hurt the Orlesians' feelings or not. He was surrounded by loyal retainers, and accompanied by two mabari. His wife, at his side, had killed dragons.

But it was Loghain himself who dealt with the attack, responding instantly, rising since he could not side-step, catching the young man's wrist in a steely grip.

With his left fist, he slammed hard into his attacker's elbow. There was too much armor there to succeed in breaking his arm, but the shock caused Boniface to drop the dagger. Instantly every Fereldan had drawn a weapon, and fallen in a protective circle around Loghain.

"You killed my grandfather!" Boniface shrieked, as Loghain forced him to his knees. "You ruined my family!"

Loghain stared at him, nonplussed, and then snorted a laugh and punched the boy out.

"Killed his *grandfather*?' That's a new one." He glared at Prosper. "So, Duke? This was your scheme all along?"

"Of course not!"

It could have been quite the disaster. Since the Fereldans were drawing their weapons, the Orlesians went for theirs. Prosper stepped out in front and called for order.

"Hear me! Hear me! We shall not fight each other!"

Very visibly, he dropped his sword,

And his belt knife, And his boot knife. And the other boot knife. And even the dirk hidden up his left sleeve.



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"All right," said Bronwyn, "We'll all drop our weapons on three. One... two..."

An awful pause.

"... three."

She cast the Keening Blade down with a clang. With some hesitation, the blades were lowered, and sheathed, and an uneasy peace was restored. Loghain had not bothered to draw his sword at all.

Then there was the difficulty about what to do with the assassin. It was obviously undesirable for Fereldans to kill Orlesian nobles out of hand. Prosper had his own men seize him and take him away.

"I shall have to make an example of him," he sighed. "Stupid boy. I don't suppose you would care to conscript him?"

Bronwyn frowned, and glanced at Loghain. He shrugged.

"Give me some time to consider it," she said. "I have to think about how my people would react to it, and if it would be perceived as a reward. That's unacceptable. On the other hand, so much reckless anger deserves a proper outlet."

Prosper met with the local nobles and upper clergy in private. There he stated his firm conviction that Bronwyn was indeed Andraste's True Champion, and specially favored by the Maker. He read sections from his bound copy of the Conclave's minutes. The burning in effigy in Val Royeaux was brought up, and abruptly slapped down with Prosper's eyewitness account and the grim facts of what happened immediately after.



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"Opposing her is clearly offensive to the Maker," Prosper concluded. "Whatever you may think of Loghain Mac Tir, the man is her husband, the King of Ferelden, and a tactician without peer. We must face this darkspawn threat immediately and with great resolve, and we must be grateful for the allies that the Maker has sent our way."

The Revered Mother of Halamshiral was pious and a bit doddering, but was deeply impressed. Most of the nobles were likewise convinced, and those who were not were convinced by Prosper's pragmatic arguments about the wisdom of letting the Fereldans lead in the fight against the Blight. Other nobles cherished a secret passion for the Red Queen, and hoped to win her notice by brave deeds. Then, too, they needed a leader of their own. Empress Celandine sounded promising, and offered a more secure future than an Orlais fractured into a hundred little principalities.

Prosper gave the same lecture, only with rather less courtesy, to Boniface Clery in the Halamshiral dungeons, and explained that though he was being given the great and undeserved opportunity of becoming a Grey Warden to expiate his cowardly and shameful attack on a guest, he would also have to suffer a public punishment for such an attack.

So, instead of a public beheading, Boniface Clery was given twenty lashes in the Market; not before a distinguished group of nobles, but before the mob of the city, who found the plight of a young nobleman in difficulties irresistibly funny. Afterwards, he was turned over to the




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Grey Warden Aveline Valen, whom Bronwyn thought was the best choice to make him shape up. As for the boy's family, they were a matter for Prosper de Montfort's justice, and Bronwyn did not envy them.

They departed soon after, with more elves joining the band from Jader. Loghain found their red banners rather ridiculous. Prosper thought them ominous.



Civil society had collapsed in Lydes.

Bronwyn knew that things were bad there, based on the stories she'd heard from refugees running away from the city. As they approached, it obvious that the situation had deteriorated rapidly. Smoke rose in the distance, and they feared the darkspawn had attacked.

It was not darkspawn. Perhaps, in some ways, it was worse.

Off to the side of the road ahead of them, there was what appeared to be a battle, until they rode closer and saw it was a massacre. One side had weapons of glittering steel; their victims were unarmed, huddled together kneeling, hands raised in submission, mouths screaming for mercy. Corpses sprawled in the undergrowth. People were dragging out struggling figures and holding them over logs while a squad of men with axes and greatswords beheaded them. Some of the victims were very small. With each blow the frenzied mob cheered, as the triumphant headsmen displayed their bloody prizes.

"They're killing elves! They're killing children!" Tara



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cried. She loosed a fireball at the mob. It exploded among them, knocking the attackers down and burning some. Two, on fire, rushed shrieking into the underbrush.

Loghain swore, and ordered a company of pikemen forward. With shield and pikes, they could dominate a crowd better than most without engaging in talk, which was pointless with such a mob. As he came closer, he realized he could barely understand their jargon, anyway. Bronwyn, of course, was horrified at the slaughter, and had to know what was happening.

"Stop!" she shouted in Orlesian. "What are you doing, killing unarmed elves? You!" she pointed at a big man with an axe. "Tell me!"

"The elves are in league with the darkspawn!" the man sputtered. "The priest told us so! They summoned the creatures to attack Orlais!"

Shouts and cheers echoed this bizarre claim.

"What priest?" Bronwyn demanded, livid. "Point her out to me! I want to see this priest who thinks she knows more about darkspawn than a Grey Warden!"

There were hesitant murmurs of '*Mère Sidoine!*' and scattered protests. Bronwyn ignored them.

"Well? Priest! Come out, you coward! Surely you're proud of your handiwork!"

"Oh, Bronwyn!" Leliana whispered, pleading. "Don't!"

A few worthy citizens tried to shield the woman, but most flinched away. The priest was young, with short-



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cropped hair and wild eyes. She stepped forward defiantly, her chin lifted.

"Je n'ai pas peur de toi, hérétique! Je suis la servante fidèle du Créateur!"

Beside herself with rage, Bronwyn jumped down from her horse and grabbed the woman by the throat.

"Liar! Mentreuse! Lâche! Tu aimes le sang, toi? Alors bois-en!"

Bronwyn dragged her over to the pile of headless corpses and pushed her face into a child's gory throat, rubbing it in.

"Had your fill of blood yet? Maybe you want a little more!"

She dragged the woman up, showing the crowd the blood-smearred face, and then threw the priest to the ground in contempt.

"Here's your true enemy!" she raged in Orlesian. "Here's the one who summoned evil into your midst! This woman made you pawns in her lust for cruelty. She lied to you about the darkspawn, about which she knows nothing! The darkspawn acknowledge no allies! They are mindless monsters. To say that anyone: elf, human, or dwarf could be in league with them is a lie!"

The priest groaned, and tried to struggle to her feet. Bronwyn stamped on her back with a dragonbone boot.

"Ai-je dit que tu pouvais te lever?" In Fereldan, Bronwyn snarled, "Maker deliver me from troublesome priests!"

Ser Silas slid down from his mount, and walked up behind her, his Templar armor an ensign of authority, his



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hands up in a soothing gesture.

"La Reine Rouge a raison," he said, his voice pitched to persuade. "This priest is demented. She knows nothing of darkspawn. Her heart is full of fear, and she lashes out blindly. Your own Revered Mother cannot preach such wicked foolishness!"

Loghain watched the crowd with growing concern. They were cowed, but still dangerous, feeling strong in the anonymity of a mob. A group of Wardens rushed forward to help the survivors: a pitiful band of no more than a score. Most were children, protected by the bodies of their elders. Some were injured badly, and Anders and Niall instantly hurried to treat them, including a small, unconscious boy, his arm hanging by bloody shreds. At the sight of the arcane blue light, the crowd went berserk.

"Magie!" howled a woman. *"Sorcières infâmes!"*

A rock bounced off Bronwyn's helmet. Loghain had had enough.

"Pikemen! Move in! You Wardens, get those elves out of the way!"

Quite a few people ended up dead, and those dead were all citizens of Lydes. Prosper did not care, as they were commoners and of little use, other than the headsmen who had shown skill. They, alas, were dead, along with the rabble-rousing priest. Prosper did not like that sort, either. Priests ought to do as they were told by their rulers. Not many of the Orlesians had witnessed the confrontation, and those who

had were only puzzled that the Red Queen had bothered to bandy words with peasants, rather than simply riding them down. She had a soft heart for children, apparently: even elven children. Some noblewoman were like that.

They discovered, as the survivors were helped into wagons, that these poor few represented the last of the Alienage of Lydes. There had been a series of purges, and those who could flee had been allowed through the gates. Not satisfied with killing most of the elves and driving the rest from their homes with nothing, a mob had pursued them, determined to exact vengeance for every imagined wrong.

Much of the army began setting up camp outside the walls. The Dalish, for obvious reasons, were not about to enter a city that had treated elves in such a way. It was unthinkable to take the elven survivors of the massacre back into Lydes. Prosper knew he must go and meet with the city officials, and he and Loghain preferred that Bronwyn stayed far from sights that would certainly enrage her. A group of Healers, including some Wardens, accompanied Prosper into Lydes.

And inside the city it was equally bad. No guards were at the gates. The strong force that entered Lydes discovered that the smoke was rising from burning bodies... not on pyres, but bound to stakes. These were accused mages, and over fifty people had been murdered in this way. Not only people: a cat had been burned along with one woman, for some insane reason. Some bodies were reduced to bone and ash, some were only charred in places, the naked

dead bodies exposed, the faces contorted in their final expressions of mortal agony. Some of the dead bore the marks of shocking torture and mutilation.

"Where are the priests?" Prosper asked aloud. "Where are the Templars? Where are the city guards, for that matter?"

There were no signs of any such individuals. Looters were running unhindered about the city, but melted away at the sight of soldiers.

Unbelievably, the lynchings were still going on. Even as troops marched into the Chantry square, a battered twelve-year-old boy was being chained to a stake in front of the Chantry. All sorts of the things had been heaped together to fuel the flames: broken furniture, shop signs, house walls — even a spinning wheel. It was, of course, not necessary to reduce the suspected mage to ashes: only that he die of smoke inhalation or burns, preferably the latter.

Nearby, a fire had already caught, and flames were licking up, closer and closer to a young girl. Her scanty, bloody shift caught fire, and burned from the hem up, exposing her to the taunting, raucous crowd. The girl shrieked as her skin blistered, but her cries of agony were drowned by the roar of delight as her long hair burned like a torch.

By the time rescue reached her, she had been burned over most of her body. The mob had fled, terrified at the sight of soldiers, the strong among them trampling the weak.

Apparently, from the gabbling nonsense the soldiers could get out of the people they caught, these people tied

to stakes were mages.

"That's ridiculous!" Niall protested. "The only way you could burn a mage at the stake is if you had Templars or other mages to suppress their magic. If you tried to bind a mage and set him on fire, he'd break free, and probably become an abomination."

There were manifestly no abominations in the Chantry square, so Prosper accepted that the dead were victims of hysteria. He paused, lip curling at the hideous sight of the burned girl.

"Will she live?"

"It's going to take a lot of work," Anders predicted, after the girl was put into a healing coma. "And she'll likely never be the same."

Some of the soldiers were sent to the Chantry, and found the doors barred and the lower windows boarded over. There had been an unsuccessful attempt to set the building on fire. After some pounding, and Prosper's declaration of who he was and that yes, he had a large force at his disposal, the doors were unbarred and some Templars poked their heads out. Prosper demanded an audience with the Revered Mother.

There had been an attempt to maintain order, he was told, but everything had fallen apart. People were frantic when Blight disease appeared in the city. The refugees were blamed, and many were killed. A young priest, Mother Sidoine, had defied the hierarchy and had taken to the streets, leading wild mobs against the "enemies of the Faithful." Mother Sidoine preached that Blight disease

was an infallible sign of sin, telling her believers that striking out against evil magic would protect them. Elves were inferior creatures, prone to sin, and thus a source of disease. They were natural allies of the darkspawn, also creatures of sin. The Alienage, she declared, must be cleansed. So, too, must the mansions of the rich, who employed elves.

"Yes," Prosper said calmly, "I believe I have met the young woman. She will trouble you no more."

Relief was expressed at that, as under her instigation, the steward had been stoned to death on the steps of the palace, and Templars had been mobbed and killed in the streets when they attempted to protect suspected mages. The Chantry itself had been attacked, and at last there was nothing for it but to batten down for a siege. Now that a duly constituted authority was in the city, of course, the doors could be opened once more, and a service of thanksgiving be celebrated.

Prosper and his guard rode up to Lydes Palace to see the body of the steward hanging over the entrance. Inside it was in chaos, overrun by looters, bandits, charlatans, whores, and thugs. After a lengthy, nasty fight to gain control, they found some survivors, mostly servants. The Marquis of Lydes, his Marquise, and their two oldest children had been in Val Royeaux when it fell. Prosper knew them well. However, hiding under a bed was the youngest daughter, five years old. In the room were the bodies of her two older sisters, seven and ten, her governess, and four maidservants, human and elven, all of whom had been raped and slaughtered. The little

girl was in shock, and had not yet spoken.

It was a drain on men and resources, but a strong garrison must be set up here under a reliable man, and order restored by draconian means. The mobs would be dispersed where they were found, and looters were to be hanged on the spot. He sent a message to Bronwyn and Loghain that the city was a mess, and that he must stay here a day or two to put down the disorder.

Little Lady Florette was a concern. Very likely she was now the rightful Marquise of Lydes, but she obviously could not be left in this place with no reputable women to care for her, and the situation so tense.

Bronwyn offered a rational, humane solution.

"Why can't she stay with the princesses? I think they would be very kind to her."

Thus it was settled. The child, well-guarded, would be taken to Jader, and would live with the Imperial Princesses as their little maid-of-honor. They would pet and pamper her, and perhaps she would heal somewhat from her horrible experiences. Prosper de Montfort was not completely heartless toward children, most especially if the child was pretty, extremely wellborn, and potentially a great heiress. It would be convenient if she was well-disposed toward him. His son Cyril might need a demesne of his own someday, especially if Montfort was lost.

Clovis, the Warden of Jader, approached Bronwyn with

"private Warden business," and after hearing him out, she found it was one more thing to cause her worry.

"You know, of course, Commander, that the most essential task after killing the Archdemon is to preserve its blood. Without it, there will be no more Wardens for the next Blight."

Bronwyn had not thought of it at all, and was rather taken aback. Yes, she could see it was essential, but how to manage it? Or, at least, manage it discreetly? If a group of Warden mages started pumping Archdemon blood into kegs, the entire allied army would label them as Blood Mages before the next dawn – and rightly, too.

Everyone would want to see the Archdemon and probably take a poke at it with their sword, once it was safely dead. She would have to make up some ridiculous lie about 'infection,' perhaps, so they would back off until the blood was drained, preserved, and stored. What a bother. She met with the mages, and warned them. Then she sent a party into Lydes, and bought up every clean barrel in the city.

"How have the Wardens kept this secret all these years?" puzzled Tara. "What a giveaway! 'Er... stand back while we drain the Tainted Old God completely of blood. Move along. Nothing to see here!"

The army set out from Lydes, wondering what further horrors they would encounter in their march. The elves of Jader and Halamshiral were becoming militant and hostile toward their fellow Orlesians. Loghain hated Orlais

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the more he saw of it; and the longer they were here, the larger the Orlesian contingent grew.

Bronwyn had worries of her own.

"And now we have to deal with that fellow in Verchiel who hates Wardens!"

She was anxious to meet the darkspawn and get her new people joined. Many were quite ill. She suspected that Clery boy would survive, surly and sullen as he was, brooding over his realization that the world had played him for a fool. The Wardens closed ranks around him, backing up Aveline, his mentor, giving him no chance for further bad behavior. Minjonet helped too. Of the three Jader Wardens, she blended best into the Fereldan Grey Wardens, and had made friends rather quickly with Aveline and Leliana. She also seemed to like Nevin quite well. The new elves among them were finding their way, encouraged by Adaia not to take rubbish from anybody. Boniface discovered early that he could not bully his fellow recruits, whatever their race.

On the other hand, no one mocked him for his old-fashioned armor. His family was not hounding him, demanding that he right all their wrongs while they did nothing themselves. And he had a newer, better horse, courtesy of the Wardens.

As the army moved toward Verchiel, a new marching song rippled through the Fereldan ranks. Leliana laughed, and immediately took it up.

*Here's forty coppers in your hand
For those who'll join our fearless band;*

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*To list and fight the foe today
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.*

*When duty calls me, I must go
To stand and face another foe
but part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away.*

*When evil stalks upon the land
I'll neither hold nor stay my hand
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.*

*O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.*



CHAPTER 16

THE WILD SWANS OF HIGHEVER

IN THE WAY OUT OF LYDES, THEY WERE OVERTAKEN BY A COMPANY OF FERELDANS WHO WISHED TO SERVE AT THE FRONT.

It was a miscellany of freeholders, scouts, unemployed artisans, sprinkled with and officered by those who called themselves mercenaries, but were certainly bandits in lean times. They traveled light and moved fast, being only too skilled in living off the land and the people dwelling there.

Among the company were some friends of Brosca, who recognized them with a whoop.

Bustrum! Ostap! Come on! Join us over here! Torvald, you remember them, don't you?"

Torvald managed a weak smile, remembered the intimidating chaperones who had loomed over his first meeting with Brosca.

Brosca, of course, was really glad to see the Avvars, and gave a shout to Bronwyn.

"Bronwyn! Look! It's Bustrum and Ostap!"

Some were shocked at her familiar tone, but Bronwyn

turned to see what Brosca wanted. She was pleased to see the Avvar scouts herself, and waved them forward to speak to her.

The two men loped up the column to her, not the least weary after their forced march, and gave her the brisk nods that passed for bows among the Avvars.

"Well met, Avvar friends. I thought you were staying in the foothills by the Frostback Gates."

"There are great doings here in the west, Lady Queen," rumbled Bustrum. "Rumors of the great war of our time. We wish to see new lands in which to fight, for Korth the Mountain Father smiles on the willing warrior. There must be representatives of our people who will sing the tale in our villages one day."

Bronwyn laughed. "I hope we're all around to sing of it then. Who is your captain?"

"You are, Lady, if you will have us."

"Did you wish to join the Wardens?"

The two men exchanged glances, and shrugged. Ostap answered, "If it comes to that, we would not object."

They were given a place among the Wardens, and marched on sturdily. Brosca remarked on their strength to Sigrun.

"If the oxen get tired, those two can pull the wagons."

By the time they were halfway to Verchiel, Bronwyn and Loghain had a much better grasp of their situation. A patrol had gone north to the port of Lydes, where they discovered that three Fereldan ships and their warriors had more or less taken control of the port. There had been multiple attempts

to bribe each of the three captains by people desperate to flee Orlais. One enterprising fellow had gone in a fishing boat to Jader, and urged some shipmasters there to come to the port to take on passengers – some of whom would pay anything. The three Fereldan ships were very valuable where they were, in case they had wounded or refugees they did not trust to the hazards of the road back through Orlais.

Along the Imperial Highway they met more survivors, including a few former captains who had heard there was some sort of nobleman claiming to speak for the new Empress. Some of these were decent sorts, and willing to swear allegiance to Prosper as the Empress' proxy. Not all wanted to go west.

"Monseigneur, we're needed here, too!" one grizzled veteran protested. "We're the only ones keeping order in the Dales. The peasants have revolted in the south and are burning manors. There's talk of bands of apostate mages roaming the land. Down by Falais, some bandits haven taken over an entire village, and their leader calls himself a baron now!"

"If the darkspawn win," Prosper countered. "None of that will matter."

He saw the man's point, however, and allowed his company to act for the Imperial Crown in the countryside. As long as they spread the word about "Empress Celandine," they would have a degree of legitimacy.

As they went on, Bronwyn expected to see more refugees, but they did not. The theory was that anyone who could leave Verchiel had already left, and whoever was escaping the area

around the mouth of the Orne was going south or west, or following the coast to the port of Lydes. It made sense. According to the Nevarran lore Jowan and Carver had picked up, dragons had a long flying range, and theoretically could cross the Waking Sea at Val Royeaux. It was an unpleasant thought.

They were also seeing more cases of Blight disease, and more Taint in the landscape. More dead, too. The game shot by hunters was carefully checked to make sure it was safe for consumption.

One of their hunters was attacked by a pack of desperate bandits. He managed to make it to safety, and a punitive party was sent to track them down. There was something of a scrap, since the bandits had taken over an abandoned farmhouse. Afterwards, it was clear that all of the bandits had been rid-dled with Taint, and the Wardens were hastily summoned.

"They'll all infected," Jowan told Bronwyn. "And all the victims the bandits kidnapped: women, girls, boys...It's bad. Most of them are already ghouls."

Bronwyn ordered the area cleared.

"This is Warden business."

The dead bandits were thrown in a ditch. The prisoners – grey-skinned, hollow-eyed, raving – were examined. At first glance, it appeared that all of them were beyond saving.

"The only thing we can give them now is peace," said Jowan.

Anders tensed. "Quick to give up on them, aren't you? Who's going to cut their throats? You?"

"I was thinking we'd give them all some Quiet Death..."

"I don't kill my patients!"

"Lower your voices!" Bronwyn hissed. "These people have suffered enough. What do you suggest, Anders? That we make that little girl over there undergo the Joining instead? That's a far worse way to die, and you know it!"

He looked sick and hunted. "I can't just kill them," he whispered. "Some of them might make it. They deserve a chance!"

"And what are we going to do with child Wardens?"

Anders threw up his hands in exasperation. "I don't know! They can carry messages! They can help Adaia! They can do anything but lie there and die!"

Jowan shook his head. "We don't know for certain if the new Joining potion prevents the Calling or not. You could be condemning them to a short life of nightmares and violence. How can they gather darkspawn blood? I thought we were holding off on the Joining for our new people until they could face the darkspawn."

"We'll give them a choice," said Bronwyn.

She knelt by one woman huddled in a corner, whimpering over her blighted hands.

"Your only chance is to become a Grey Warden. It might cure you. Would you like to try?"

Tears trickled from the greying eyes. The woman shook her head. "I just want it to be over! Over!"

Jowan gave her some Quiet Death to drink, and eased her back onto the floor as she died painlessly. Two of the women were beyond comprehending what was said to them. In the

end, Bronwyn had the two of them, the three girls and two boys – the elder perhaps thirteen – taken into storeroom of the little house, and the Joining potion administered to them. None of them survived. It was ugly, but at least none of them were quite aware of what was happening.

"Let's not do that again," Bronwyn muttered, her throat thick.

"Bronwyn! There's another one!"

The little boy was hiding behind a kitchen cupboard. He screamed, fingers scrabbling on the dirty boards, as Brosca hauled him out. He stared wildly at Bronwyn with sunken eyes and sobbed in terror at the armored, bloody figures surrounding him.

"Don't kill me! Please don't kill me! I'll be good!" He clasped his hands and began babbling out the Chant.

"O Maker, hear my cry:

Guide me through the blackest nights

Steel my heart against..."

He paused, confused.

"Steel my heart against..." He sobbed, "I don't remember what I'm supposed to steel my heart against!"

Leliana stooped down by him and took him in her arms. "'Steel my heart against the temptation of the wicked.'" she quoted. "You were doing very well. Don't be frightened. We're here to help you." She looked up at Bronwyn, blue eyes imploring.

Bronwyn sighed. "All right. We have some medicine that may help you if you're brave and drink it right up."

He whimpered, "It's poison?"

"No," Bronwyn answered, feeling like the foulest liar in the world. "It tastes terrible, but I've drunk it and I'm still alive. Drink it down." She signaled to Anders, who looked thoroughly sick, but it had been his idea, after all.

Miraculously, they soon had a small Grey Warden. Alistair gently took the sleeping lad up with him on his horse. The bodies were burned, as was the farmhouse, the barns, and all the sheds. Anything that looked like Taint was set ablaze as well. They rode back to camp in silence.

A few hours later, they learned that the boy's name was Pepin, that he was ten years old, and that he was the son of one of the bandits. The father, they also learned, had not always been a bandit, but was a bookbinder by trade. Father and son had escaped from Val Royeaux, and on the road had fallen in with some other refugees. In the end, they had done what was necessary to survive, like so many others. He was told, and seemed to accept, that his father had been sick because of the darkspawn, and that had caused him to do wicked things that he would not have done otherwise. Quinn was assigned to be his mentor, much to the bigger boy's bewilderment.

"I didn't reckon I'd ever be in charge of anything," he mumbled.

Bronwyn said, "Well, you're in charge of Pepin. Make sure he eats, sleeps, washes, and doesn't get into trouble."

They had been forced to burn all his clothing. Of course

they had no armor that would fit a scrawny ten-year-old. Some elven clothing was made to fit, and the smallest Grey Warden tabard was belted over all. Some of the other camp boys were quite jealous of what they deemed Pepin's splendid appearance, and no one outside of the Wardens and Loghain understood that the boy was really, himself, a Grey Warden.

"And he now has thirty years," Loghain remarked. "That will make him, what? Forty when he dies of Grey Warden old age?"

"It's better than dying of it at ten," Bronwyn maintained. The Warden secret of the new potion was none of Loghain's business. "And who's to say he'll make it that far? We have yet to meet the Archdemon."

There was some debate about where to go after Verchiel. Should they go to Montsimnard? It would be the easy route, lying as it did on the Imperial Highway. It might also not be the wisest route if Val Royeaux was their destination. The Imperial Highway looped all the way around Lake Celestine. That would be a ridiculous detour for the army, though Prosper worried about the situation in cities like Val Firmin and Val Celeste. Instead, some distance southwest of Verchiel, a road — La Voie Verte — branched off from the Imperial Highway toward the River Orne and ultimately to Val Royeaux. Loghain persisted in calling it the Greenway, and it was so marked on his exquisitely detailed map of Orlais. That road, too, would not take them on a direct route to the mouth of the River Orne, but

a little upriver, the place where Emperor Drakon long ago decreed that the bridge would be built. After the bridge, two roads diverged again. One led west to Val Foret and the other traveled almost due north to Val Royeaux.

"The Imperial army camped on the west side of the river, the night it was attacked," Loghain mused over dinner in camp. "They intended to go south and cross the bridge... here. The other side of the river is marshy and difficult to cross, it seems."

Prosper agreed with that. "Quite impossible on horseback. Impossible for wagons, too. For that matter, the darkspawn may be there by now, but the marshes are treacherous and a bad place for a battle. If they are not Blighted, they are only good for shooting birds. There is good hunting there: ducks, geese, even swans. The Empress was very fond of roast swan, presented in its feathers." A touch of nostalgia colored his voice.

"Well, I certainly hope nobody tries to serve that to *me*," Bronwyn laughed. "Couslands can't eat swans."

Astrid, a few seats away, overheard her. She had never seen a real swan, but she had seen pictures of them in books. They were supposed to be remarkably graceful birds.

"What's the matter with swans?" she asked. "Are they poison?"

"Certainly not!" Prosper replied. "They are a royal dish, and only the Empress and those nobles she favored were permitted to eat them. They require careful preparation, but with the right sauce, they are quite magnificent. Is there also such a sumptuary law in Ferelden?"

"Not that I've heard of," Loghain shrugged. "I find them too oily and leathery to trouble with, and..." he found himself about to refer to Celia, and her impassioned pleas to spare the birds, and decided that would be impolitic. "Some people find them too beautiful to hunt. They'd rather see them swimming in an ornamental pond in their gardens than serve them at the table."

"And that's certainly the case in Highever," Bronwyn declared. "It's tradition. No Cousland can eat a swan. It's a crime to shoot them in Highever."

"Why?" asked Leliana. She smiled, and quickly swallowed a bite. "There's a story about it, isn't there? Do tell it, please, Your Majesty!"

"In order to add it to your collection?" Bronwyn teased.

"Story! Story!" demanded Carver, a bit tipsy. He turned pink as Loghain nailed him with an icy gaze. Gathering his courage. "We Wardens used to tell stories among ourselves. We haven't in ages."

"It's true," sighed Leliana, "We did. Even when there was just a handful of us. I remember that Her Majesty told the very first story when she traveled only with Arl Alistair, Morrigan, Sten, and me. Just five of us, and how simple our mission seemed then."

"Our mission continues," said Sten, speaking up. "At the time, we were asked to participate in story telling, that our Commander might comprehend our natures more clearly. It is not illogical."

"I remember that story," Alistair said, wagging his brows at Bronwyn. "It was pretty gruesome."

"'Twas an excellent story, and a sensible warning against blind trust." Morrigan maintained.

"So tell us about the swans," Astrid said, settling back into her seat.

Voices around the trestle tables hushed, as word spread that the Queen would tell a story. The Fereldans were pleased, and the Orlesians charmed. Berthold de Guesclin watched her, heart burning oddly. He was not alone in his feelings. Old and young, from Arl Wulffe to Arl Corbus, waited in anticipation. Little Pepin could not quite stop eating – for he had never been so hungry – but munched more quietly, looking on in wonder, clinging to Quinn's side. The Avvars drank mead from their horns, glad they had chosen to be here among heroes, and hear the tales of old. Fenris hung on every word, his green eyes glittering in the torchlight.

Bronwyn saw there was no getting out of it. "If I must. This is an tale of the Couslands. It seems odd to share it in such a faraway land."

BRONWYN'S STORY OF THE WILD SWANS OF HIGHEVER

There was once a daughter of the Teyrn of Highever, whom a jealous stepmother transformed into a swan.

Her father was filled with grief and rage. The false stepmother he slew, and he sent far away to the Circle of Magi to ask for help returning his daughter to her human form.

Meanwhile he put a chain of gold about the swan's neck, so all

would know her as his daughter, and he and his huntsmen kept watch on her as she swam about the pond near the castle.

But the Circle was slow to respond, and the teyrn waited long for their aid. One day, as the breath of autumn chilled the air, a flight of swans passed overhead. One of the swans called out to the teyrn's daughter, and she spread her wings and flew away after them, far away over the Waking Sea.

The winter was long and sad, and the teyrn mourned his lost daughter. He kept a great mage at the castle, hoping against hope that someday his daughter would return and be delivered.

The spring came, and there was a flutter of white seen by the pond. The teyrn hastened there, followed by the great mage and the teyrn's huntsmen. They made their way through the tall reeds, and saw that up ahead a swan had made a nest. The teyrn saw a swan on the nest, and about her neck was a golden chain. He called out gladly, but suddenly there was a cry and a great blow, as the swan's mate rose up out of the reeds and attacked the teyrn with his mighty wings, and stabbed at him with his powerful beak.

The teyrn was angry, and called his huntsmen to shoot the swan, but the mage told him it was too late: his daughter had taken a mate, and as it is the swan's way to mate for life, there was nothing to be done. No longer was she a maiden in swan form, but a wild swan who was once the Teyrn of Highever's daughter.

So the teyrn went sadly away, grieving each day: grieving when he saw the two beautiful birds swimming together on the pond, twining their necks together in the way of swans; grieving at the sight of their cygnets following along behind. The wild

swans left in the autumn, but returned for many a year, until one spring they did not, and the nest among the reeds stood empty; and the teyrn died soon after.

But from that time to this, it is a hanging offense to shoot a swan within the teyrnir of Highever, and no Cousland may harm one anywhere, lest he be named kinslayer. And that is the story of the Wild Swans of Highever.

"The Queen is wise," Ostap muttered to Bustrum. "the Lady of the Skies forbids the killing of swans!"

"I knew that Couslands didn't eat swans," Corbus told Wulffe. "But I didn't know why. I'll never eat a swan as long as I live!"

Wulffe snorted and slapped him on the back. For that matter, the Wulffes never ate swans either.

Prosper felt oddly like a cannibal, thinking back on magnificent feasts. Quite a charming story, though, if in the old style.

They saw grim sights as they neared Verchiel. Smoke rose on the horizon. At one point they came across the remains of some sort of skirmish. Astrid and Falkor got down and turned over some of the bodies.

Bronwyn rode up and looked over the repulsive, rotting remains, and shook her head. "Humans can be their own worst enemies." To Astrid she said, "And we haven't yet come across any Orlesian Wardens. Where are they?"

"Apparently they're all west of Verchiel by now. Do you think everyone from Montsimmard went north?"

"I can't believe that would be a sensible thing to do. The Orlesians must have left some sort of garrison at Montsimmard. I'm considering sending a courier there."

"Not a bad idea. It will have to be a Warden. Or two. Maybe three would be smarter. If there's anything to coordinate with, we should give it a try."

"Maybe we can spare one of the Jader Wardens. He's likely to be known to the Wardens in Montsimmard. Clovis irritates me, and he's got a good horse.. His questionable attitude won't matter, as long as I send sound people of our own. We might be delayed at Verchiel anyway."

"At least we've not yet seen darkspawn."

"There is that." Bronwyn thought about it. "I haven't sensed them either. It's almost like being blind..."

They both laughed, and a little later Anders and Morigan were requested to fly ahead and see what there was to see in Verchiel.

Well, darkspawn were to be seen, first of all. The city was surrounded by the creatures, their numbers increasing daily, gibbering and shaking weapons at the defenders on the walls. It was not the horde, or if it was, it was only a small contingent. They were certainly enough to be dangerous. No one was traveling in or out of the city, and the nearby farms had been destroyed. So far, the archers on the walls were enough to keep the creatures at bay.

Flying into Verchiel proved fairly dangerous. That was

not just because of what was outside the barred city gates, but because there was a great deal of tension inside, and there was one district in Verchiel in which a hawk or a raven looked positively tasty.

The mages in bird form learned that once the elves had done their part to build up the city's defenses, they were returned to the Alienage, which was then locked down. The elves were starving. De Flambard cared nothing about that. The Alienage was not near a curtain wall, and the elves were of no further use. He would have let them go their way, had it not been imperative to keep the gates shut. While the elves had no bows and arrows to shoot birds, they threw rocks very accurately, and some had slingshots to give them greater range. The birds fled away quickly, evading the snares, the missiles, and the bitter, hungry curses.

The rest of Verchiel was not particularly well-fed, either, but they were not yet starving. A great deal of food had been stored away, and it was being doled out sparingly in order to last as long as possible. There was much resentment about that, and a growing fear of the darkspawn. It was still advisable for Anders and Morrigan to be very careful. Flying through open windows and listening to conversations out of sight proved the safest mode of espionage.

Aside from the elves, it was clear that the Sieur de Flambard was not popular with the city, but admired by his soldiers. They thought he had shown remarkable foresight.

"Knows what he's doing, he does," a guard maintained.

"He kept the sick out, so at least we don't have Blight Plague. If any cases are found, his lordship's given the order to shoot them full of arrows from a distance!"

"That's a mercy," agreed his fellow. "We don't need the darkspawn plague here like it is out in the country!"

The Sieur de Flambard also enjoyed the support of the Chantry. Perhaps the Revered Mother was afraid of him, and perhaps not, but even the Templars were obeying his orders. He, for his part, was giving them a free hand with any mages found in the city. As it was impossible to transport them to a Circle, they were being quietly executed in the lower levels of the Chantry. Anders was so enraged by this piece of news that he nearly lost control of his shape.

Morrigan carefully penetrated a little deeper into the central Keep, where de Flambard had taken up residence. Eventually Anders followed her, wanting a look at the man.

He looked... like a normal person. An anxious, worried person. The worst part was that he thought he was doing his best. He was surrounded by captains and clerks, trying to hold the city together, trying to deal with the darkspawn noose tightening around the city's throat. He simply did not consider elves and mages to be citizens... or even people.

Morrigan studied the Orlesian more dispassionately. This was a man who might need to die very soon. There was no time to bandy words with a fool.

They spent a little longer, eavesdropping out of sight in the halls of power. They listened to what the man's subor-

dinates said behind his back. Then they listened to what was being said in the street. At last they flew high, high, high above the walls, and away from the city.

They returned to the column, keeping far beyond bowshot. They discreetly came down amid the trees ahead of Bronwyn and Loghain, and then walked out in human form. Loghain snorted at the sight of them, but was glad of their information.

"The darkspawn have reached Verchiel," Anders reported. "Not the horde itself, but some fairly strong bands. A few hundred all together, spread out on the plain. It's bad enough there that the city is locked down. The city archers are keeping the darkspawn back so far, but I suspect not for long."

Morrigan added, "The nobleman who commands the city is a masterful man, and not without some talent, but he dares not lead a sally out to crush the invaders, lest he be locked out himself. The people are angry with him and his men. The washerwomen whine that their children are hungry, and that their leader does nothing to drive the darkspawn away."

"Not all the city dislikes him," said Anders. "The Chantry thinks he's just the thing because he doesn't care if they execute every mage they find. The elves hate him, but they're locked up and starving, and soon won't be a problem."

Loghain was unimpressed by all of it. "So his strategy is to hide behind his walls and let the darkspawn take what they want. How long does he think that will work?"

"They're well supplied, and the food is being rationed.

That's the reason that the people are angry. I don't know what he plans beyond that. Eventually they'll be swamped. He must know that. If more ogres show up, they could get past the arrows and batter down the gates."

Bronwyn felt a rush of anger. "He's probably planning to keep holding on until somebody else solves the problem for him. He has no intention of helping. Just clinging to what he has. And once the Blight is over, he'll congratulate himself for his cleverness."

They met briefly with their commanders, discussing the mage's report. Prosper looked at Anders and Morrigan, a bit puzzled, wondering how they could have gleaned so much information in such a short time. Did they see far-off events in a crystal? He had heard of such things, and wondered what he could offer these mages to change their allegiance. The man was a Warden, and spoken for, but the woman was beautiful and obviously highly intelligent. He had noticed her before at the Fereldan Court. She was quite the prize. He must find a pretext to give her an impressive gift.

"The Sieur de Flambard hates and fears Grey Wardens," said Bronwyn to the council assembled. "Therefore, Wardens will defeat the darkspawn force surrounding Verchiel. We'll attack at dawn, with the sun at our backs."

"Surely with some support," Loghain objected. "Your mage scouts indicate that there are between three to five hundred darkspawn – perhaps more under the cover of the forest."

Prosper observed the conversation without speaking; curious about how these two would conduct themselves when they did not agree. Bronwyn seemed very determined.

"Support in reserve only. I have a strong force of Wardens, including some auxiliaries and six golems. I have a large number of recruits: over eighty, in fact. I need to see how they conduct themselves against darkspawn for the first time. I'd also like to protect the rest of the army from infection as long as possible. I need to try out some new tactics against the darkspawn. Most of all, however, I want to rub in de Flambar's face the importance of the Grey Wardens."

She turned to Knight-Commander Greagoir and First Enchanter Irving with a smile. "And now I really must ask for the names of the recruits I previously requested. I believe it was ten mages and two Templars."

The two old men sighed. She had not forgotten about them after all. Grudgingly, Greagoir wrote out a list with Irving's input, and it was handed over. Bronwyn smiled on them.

"Send them to the Warden camp right away. They need to hear the briefing tonight and have a bit of time to settle in."

She then shared with them the tactical surprise she had planned for the darkspawn. There were gasps of shock all around – some admiring, like Prosper, and some very disapproving, like Greagoir. Corbus' face was a study in hopeless longing. The Fereldans were certainly surprised by the idea, but not as much so as the Orlesians, who thought the days of myth and legend were once again upon them.

The Dwarves thought it a good joke on the darkspawn, and the Dalish considered it a very sound scheme, and secretly planned to use it themselves in future.

Loghain was not exactly shocked – and did not allow a flicker of amazement to appear on his stony face. If she could pull this off, it would change the prospects of the campaign. Was he jealous of the adventure? Maybe a little. It really was – what was the word Cailan had loved so much? – yes: it was *glorious*.

It seemed less glorious when various noblemen and chevaliers approached Bronwyn for her "favor." Loghain was just about to draw his sword, when he remembered hearing about some ridiculous Orlesian custom, in which a man requested a "favor" – a glove, a ribbon, or some such – from a lady he admired to carry into battle as a keepsake. Bronwyn looked a little taken aback herself.

She rallied, though, and smiled. "Only His Majesty the King may have my favor."

Loghain was quite pleased, though he wondered what kind of favor she meant. Knowing her, it could be a spare gauntlet or a boot knife. On further consideration, the boot knife was not at all a bad idea...

A sizable force indeed. Riordan had urged her to do some serious recruiting, and she had. Some of them were unwell, and her Healers would have to do their best

She had eighteen mage recruits, and was fairly chuffed

about that. Even if only half of them survived the battle and the Joining, she would have a significant magical force. Her current mages were spread too thin: ten Circle mages and eight apostates would be a tremendous help. She turned them over to her experienced mages for assessment. If there were quality Healers among them, they would be charged with that duty and no other tomorrow.

Morrigan, Anders, and she had traced out a rough map of the country around Verchiel. The darkspawn were based in three crude camps, and were more active at night. With the dawn, they tended to settle down and seek the shade of the rocks and trees. The Grey Wardens would strike them hard, just as they were least prepared for it. Advance teams would move out fast, to be supported by the rest. She read out the names of the advance teams, and explained just what that would mean. Fenris looked mildly horrified, but did not refuse outright.

Nor did the six mages, on whom the plan rested. Not even Morrigan objected. Bronwyn made her orders clear, especially what to do at certain crucial points.

Then there were the six golems, which Bronwyn put under Shale's command. Astrid laughed out loud, but agreed. She could not command the golems herself without forgoing the adventure of being in the advance party, and that was an experience not to be missed.

Bronwyn went on with her briefing: "All of you, including the golems, will be given a bag of grenades. Thank you,

Adaia and Siofranni, for your tireless work. All of you who will be throwing: you have seen the damage radius of these weapons. Do your best not to hit your comrades," she said, lifting a brow. "The point of this battle is to kill *darkspawn*."

There were some wry chuckles. Soldiers were always injuring their own side in battle. It was regrettable, but inevitable.

Then it was time to address the recruits. Some of them looked grey and frail. Some looked desperate. Most looked at least willing. It was their only chance, after all.

"You have each been assigned to one of four parties, under the command of Wardens Aveline, Emrys, Oghren, or Clovis. You will obey your officer. Each of you will be given one of these."

She held up a little crystal vial.

"It is nearly unbreakable. In the aftermath of the battle, you are to collect a vial's worth of darkspawn blood. That is something expected of all Wardens, and is a proof of your participation in the struggle against the Blight. Keep the vial and present it to your officer when you are asked. That will not be until nightfall, when we have sorted out the situation around Verchiel."

Little Pepin whispered in Quinn's ear. The bigger boy shook his head, and Pepin tugged on his arm, dissatisfied.

"Is there a problem, Pepin?" Bronwyn asked.

The boy shrank away behind Quinn's broad shoulders. Quinn gave Bronwyn a grin.

"He just wanted to know if he was going to be in the battle."

The Wardens laughed — some of them not very kindly.

Bronwyn gave those a look, and said, "Of course not, Pepin. You need more time to grow strong and well. You will remain here in camp with..." She thought about it. "With Arl Corbus. We need a Warden to represent us among the rest of the army."

She fixed the Wardens with a stern eye, calling them to attention. "The four support parties will advance on foot." She saw the look in Boniface Clery's eye. "The advance *must* be on foot, because horses will not approach the darkspawn unless specially trained, and we have few of those horses. Untrained horses will bolt, and be worse than useless. In the future, if you have the ability to train horses and wish to make your mount more effective, we can work on that. There is no time now."

There was just time for a meal, a final look at the necessary gear, and some sleep. They would be up before dawn, moving into position. The army would be watching, as well as the Sieur de Flambarde in Verchiel. This was to be the Grey Wardens' show – Bronwyn's show – and it must be a great success.

Morrigan was in the process of brewing the women's tea, when a young page appeared before her, bowing, presenting her with an a little inlaid box and a letter.

"Madame Morrigan," he said. "This is for you. There is no need for a return message."

He vanished into the maze of tents. Morrigan turned the box over, eyeing it with suspicion, and then opened the letter instead.

Madame –

Permit me the honor of presenting to you this trifle as a token of my respect and esteem. Your extraordinary talents and ready wit have made you remarkable even in this company. I will not trouble you with expressing sentiments that you are perhaps not prepared to hear. It will be enough if the gift is of some small use to you in the future.

*Believe me, Madame, your devoted admirer,
Prosper de Montfort*

She smirked, her vanity flattered, but for all that she opened the box very carefully. One never knew.

"Ah..."

A ring. Quite a magnificent ring, in fact. Pure and heavy gold was elaborately, fantastically chased in the form of a two serpents facing one another. Held between their fangs was a large emerald. Morrigan studied it with the eye of a woman who had recently discovered jewelry and taken the trouble to learn good from bad. The emerald was a fine one, with a glint of blue deep within the green. Looking closer, she saw...

A hinge, and a hiding place beneath the stone. A poison ring. She had heard of such things: read of them in old books. What did the duke mean by it? That he thought she was poisonous? Or that she might be in need of such tricks? The letter was respectful enough; in fact, it sounded like the man was attempting to pay court to her. If she wished to be some sort of pampered concubine – which she did not – very likely she could do worse.

But the ring was pleasing to her. She found that it fit

well enough on a forefinger. The weight pleased her too. She would wear it, and tell Anders that it was plunder. And so it was, in a way... As to the secret compartment, she would give some thought as to what to put there.

Guards were posted, and the army settled down for the night. In the Wardens' camp, Leliana and Aeron sang a duet, sweet and melancholy. Three of the recruits had some talent, too, and joined in. It was something to remember. Bronwyn hoped the bass would survive: he had quite a fine voice. One of the women had a little dulcimer, and it made a pleasant addition to the lutes.

*"The minstrel boy to the war is gone,
In the ranks of death you'll find him;
His father's sword he has girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him..."*

She leaned against a tree, looking at her people as they gathered to hear the entertainment. How many would among the living tomorrow? Some of them were young: not as young as Quinn and Pepin, sitting there open-mouthed and entranced by the music; but too young for this. Of course, war and the demands of war always fell heavily on the young.

Velanna was scowling and dissatisfied. Danith spoke quietly in her ear, probably telling her to settle down. When the singers were done and applauded, there was more music: this time from the Dalish.

"Hahren na melana sahlín

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

Bronwyn smiled, remembering the song from her wedding. She had never thought to ask what it meant, but it was beautiful.

Oghren and Sigrun had organized a game of Wicked Grace and were gloating over their winnings. Bronwyn gave them a wink. Better for Oghren to be gambling than drinking. Oh, wait: he was doing that, too. Morrigan was making her blasted awful tea in a cauldron over a campfire. Anders did not want the women afflicted with Blight disease to take any, since it might interfere with the potions he was already giving them. There were unlikely to become pregnant in their current state, anyway.

Ah, look there: Adaia and Siofranni were curled up together in the shadows, kissing passionately. They seemed happy. That was always a good thing. And Nuala and Steren were also curled up together, but sound asleep.

It was time for her to sleep, too. Or at least to turn in.

She and Loghain had a lovely big tent now, given to them by the citizens of Jader. It was red, alas, and so sleeping in it made her think of being inside a dragon's mouth. But it really was quite big and lovely. It even had a partition in the back to given them a separate place to sleep. While anyone could hear anything going on in a tent, it gave a pleasant illusion of privacy.

Morrigan ran her down as the tent doorway, a steaming cup in hand, a stern look in her yellow eyes. Bronwyn took the cup, and smiled.

"Thank you. You should get some sleep yourself."

"I shall," Morrigan said stiffly. "As soon as I prevent our female companions from making fools of themselves."

The tent guards looked straight ahead, pretending to hear and see nothing. Bronwyn suspected that they had plenty to discuss when off duty.

"Good night, Morrigan."

Loghain always said he was unable to sleep, the night before a battle. Bronwyn was excited, but thought she would nod off easily enough, after some proper, thorough love-making. She slipped out of her clothes and into the wide camp bed, waving the servants off. Where was Loghain? She could hear him, some distance away, conferring with his officers. There... that was Cauthrien, and that... was Corbus. And there was the gruff voice of Arl Wulffe. The conversation sounded like it was concluding. Bronwyn blew out the candle, and lay in the red-tinted darkness, listening to the familiar noises of a camp at night.

The Dalish were still singing.

"vir sulahn'nehn

vir dirthera

vir samahl la numin

vir 'lath sa'vunin'"

Loghain said goodnight, and Bronwyn listened to his

approaching footsteps, smiling to herself. Soon after, the partition flap opened, and Loghain entered, trying to be quiet.

"I hear you," Bronwyn said softly.

In the chilly grey light before dawn, preparations were made. The Wardens moved out to the open field west of the camp, within sight of the city of Verchiel, and then stood aside to give the six most experienced mages some needed room. There was a change of air pressure, and a mighty work of magic. Then there were cries of wonder.

"Those are wyverns?" yelled Quinn, almost babbling. "They're a lot bigger than I'd thought they'd be. They're really big. Are you sure they can only carry three? Because they're really, really big."

Morrigan, Anders, Tara, Niall, Jowan, and Velanna had all shifted into their wyvern form. The sight impressed even Shale.

"How novel... how refreshing to feel petite. Indeed, I feel positively dainty. Is it your plan for the mages to simply knock the darkspawn about with their tails? That might do it, you know."

"It might!" Bronwyn laughed. "This is something in the nature of an experiment. Come on, you lot, we need to put this harness on them."

The other Wardens wanted to crowd close, to touch the wyverns, to examine them in delight and awe. Ostap and Bustrum were as awestruck as the rest, but perhaps not as surprised. These were, after all, the days of high adventure. They were fortunate to be living in them.

To the wyvern mages, Bronwyn said, "Do you remember what I said about bounding along? It would probably snap our necks. A nice, fast, smooth run at the darkspawn is what we're hoping for."

Wyvern Morrigan scoffed, sounding just like her human self. Wyvern Velanna bridled scornfully. Bronwyn only smiled. She was not too worried about Velanna following orders, since two of her passengers were Dalish – Steren and Nuala – and she would likely take pains not to deliberately harm them.

Bronwyn was riding into battle on the back of a wyvern herself, along with Leliana and Zevran. Morrigan did not care a pin for either of the latter, but Bronwyn flattered herself that Morrigan wanted her alive and well at least a little longer.

Adaia and Siofranni were handing out bags of grenades, helped by the Glavonak brothers and some of their new engineers. Torvald draped a bag over Brosca's shoulders and was rewarded with a deep kiss that left him red and grinning.

Wyverns were far taller at the shoulder than a horse. Bronwyn could use the harness to vault up into her saddle, but a number of others used the mounting blocks cobbled together for them. Zevran was second in the composite saddle and Leliana was third, giving her the space to use her bow freely.

There were Carver and Astrid, laughing together, climbing up onto Jowan's wide blue back. Fenris joined them, smiling somewhat ruefully, but smiling all the same. Those in the foot company looked on with various

expression of envy or deep, deep relief.

It was possible to sense the darkspawn ahead. Some must be coming their way, alerted by the shared Taint. They were in for a surprise.

Meanwhile, half the army had come out to see them. Once the wyverns were spotted, there was a rush, slowed by a few responsible officers.

"Are those *griffons*?" demanded one soldier, giddy with excitement.

"They're wyverns," declared Bann Cauthrien, her face carefully expressionless, her belly roiling with the desire to jump right on the back of one of the creatures and race off to battle. She added, "Everyone knows that griffons are extinct. And white."

Maeve managed to smooth down Junior Warden Pepin's hair and tabard, and make a brief bob to Arls Wulffe and Corbus.

"The Queen ordered Warden Pepin to stay with Arl Corbus," she told them.

Arl Wulffe bit back a laugh. Corbus, briefly distracted from the wonder of wyverns, was very curious about the little boy. He supposed he was like a page to the Wardens. He could practice his Orlesian with him, maybe. He was about Lothar's age, and Corbus missed his brother terribly at the moment. Lothar would have loved the wyverns.

Prosper managed to smile graciously at the sight before them. It was all he could do not to saddle up Leopold and go, too. For that matter, he wondered how Leopold was faring, and if he could smell this band of his own kind. If

he did, he might well break loose and follow them. Prosper ordered a flunkey to warn the grooms, and then sighed a bit. Another time, perhaps.

Loghain hardly knew what to say. There was Bronwyn up there, going into battle on a heraldic monster, off to fight other monsters. She looked his way and flicked him a jaunty salute. He lifted his hand in response, but could not manage a smile in response. He did not trust any one of those mages not to go mad and turn on their own people. They needed watching. Still, it was quite the sight. A little hot flame of excitement warmed the icy-hard surface of his pragmatism.

For their part, the mages in wyvern shape were fairly excited themselves: their huge eyes seeing shapes and colors denied to mere humans; their ears picking the tread of distant feet; their muzzles smelling the Taint even this far away.

The dogs were rather startled by the wyverns, but the more experienced of them, like Scout, knew that these were not enemies, but packmates in strange new shapes. They prepared to run into battle with their friends, pleased at the chance to tear at the evil-smelling enemies.

Once all the riders were settled into the harness, Bronwyn raised her arm and then dropped it, shouting, "Forward!"

The wyverns set off at a quick pace, careful not to jar their riders. The gait was extremely smooth and surprisingly silent, not at all what Bronwyn had expected. The wyverns picked up speed and then each moved toward the assigned targets. Darkspawn milled around huge bonfires outside

the city walls. They squawked with surprise and outrage at the huge shapes heading in their direction. Bronwyn laughed, feeling tall and terrible on the back of this creature, and readied her first grenade. Behind her sounded Leliana's squeal of delight and Zevran's excited laughter.

Once in range. Wyvern Morrigan spat a mass of green venom at them. It was larger than a man's head, and splattered over the darkspawn in front, glowing ominously on impact. The poisoned darkspawn tottered, some tearing at their envenomed flesh. Morrigan crashed through their ranks, scattering them like toys. She turned quickly for another go, and Bronwyn clutched at the saddle, swaying precariously.

"Blessed Andraste!" cried Leliana. "This is *fun!*"

Bronwyn threw a grenade among some fallen darkspawn. It exploded, shaking its targets. A darkspawn rolled over, spitting blood. More explosions crashed around the battlefield as wyverns and their passengers reached their targets. Far behind came a "hurrah!" as the Wardens on foot trotted up to support them. The dogs darted in and out, knocking down bewildered darkspawn, ripping out their throats.

An ogre roared, off to their left, beating its massive chest and challenging the wyverns.

"Morrigan!" shouted Bronwyn. "Let's get him!"

They charged. The speed was intoxicating. The ogre bent, reaching for a log to use as a club. Before it could straighten, the wyvern was on it, slamming into its side, knocking it off balance, clawing and spitting on it. Prac-

tically touching it, Bronwyn tossed a tar bomb into the ogre's face, blinding it. Leliana's arrow thudded into the throat, and Zevran threw a concussive grenade at its feet. They flashed past as it stumbled and fell.

Bronwyn glimpsed a big wyvern — it must be Tara — shaking a hurlock in fanged jaws, and then tossing it away, knocking down a half-dozen darkspawn. A flick from another wyvern's tail bludgeoned another band, shattering their very bones. Green venom dripped from scabby, Tainted bodies, slowing them, making them clumsy and weak.

It was a delirium of violence, unhampered by conscience or the demands of honor. They rushed on, nearly to the city walls, hardly noticing the little figures up there watching them and gesturing in excitement. There was time for one more run before the reinforcements reached them. Bronwyn gave a yell, and Morrigan circled back. She charged again, quick as a snake, and shattered a group of genlocks that had rallied against them. Two went down under Morrigan's clawed feet, and were shredded instantly, with barely a moment to utter their weird croaking death cry.

Bronwyn grabbed for her horn, and sounded a call.

Then, just as planned, she and the other melee fighters leaped down into the fray to close with the darkspawn. The wyverns moved to the outskirts of the fight, killing darkspawn stragglers, and acting as fighting platforms for the archers and grenadiers they carried.

Within moments, the others charged in on foot. Some,

like Boniface Clery, were ferocious in battle; eager to prove all sorts of things to themselves. Some were hesitant and frightened, not the stuff of warriors. If they could survive this, Bronwyn had plans for some Warden support staff. Behind the foot soldiers the earth shook.

The golems had arrived, smashing the darkspawn down, moving astonishingly fast for creatures of stone and metal. Nothing the darkspawn did had much affect on them. They simply plowed through, grabbing up hurlocks and genlocks alike and crushing their skulls.

Bursts of light and color flashed around them, as the mages did their part. They had been ordered to be careful with their magic, and avoid hurting their own people with wide-area spells. Nonetheless, they could use targeted spells to great effect. Equally usefully, they could counter the malign magic of the darkspawn emissaries and heal their comrades.

The darkspawn nearby were annihilated, but the Wardens heard more fighting to the southwest, and charged toward it, letting the wyverns dash on ahead. Another ogre was discovered, and the wyverns pounced gleefully, rendering the monster one glowing mass of green venom before it toppled.

A half-dozen genlock archers made a stand behind some rocks. An arrow whizzed past Bronwyn's ear: close enough to make her angry.

"There!" she shouted, pointing. "Up there!"

A wyvern — possibly Anders, though it moved so fast it was difficult to tell — tore the stones asunder, spilling the darkspawn

to the ground, where they were ripped apart by the dogs.

The scratchy sensation of nearby darkspawn was fading. Bronwyn divided her people once again into their patrols, and they combed the plains around the city for darkspawn stragglers. By midmorning, they were certain that the darkspawn were dead, and then they set about burning the bodies.

They were not unscathed. They had lost seven of the recruits, and there were injuries and wounds to be attended to. Bronwyn let the mages work, while she gathered her people together to assess their condition. Quite a few of them were ready for another go, if an enemy dared to show his face. Some of the recruits were in shock, but she knew that not all of them were the stuff of heroes. She made mental notes and instructed the wyverns to hold their forms. There was still Verchiel to be dealt with. She vaulted back into Morrigan's saddle, since looking menacing was the best card she had to play at the moment.

And with that, Loghain decided it was time to send a herald to Verchiel. The *Sieur de Flambard* could hardly have missed the spectacle outside his own gates.

Unsurprisingly, Olivier de Flambard still did not want to open the gates of his city. Not to Duke Prosper de Montfort, not to the Grey Wardens, and certainly not to Loghain Mac Tir. On the other hand, his city had been saved for the moment, against all hope and reason. He had seen warriors in Grey Warden tabards riding on what must

be wyverns. No matter how often he rubbed his eyes, the wyverns were still there. Two... four... no *six* of them. They were very impressive. The leader of the party, dressed in splendid red plate, had vaulted onto the back of one of the creatures, and was directing operations from there.

A herald, escorted by horsemen bearing the arms of both Orlais and Ferelden, rode up to the gate before him.

"In the name of the Alliance against the darkspawn," shouted the herald. "In the names of Queen Bronwyn and King Loghain; in the name of Duke Prosper de Montfort, speaking for the Empress-Elect Celandine; in the name of Astrid, Paragon of Orzammar, I bid you open your gates in friendship!"

"I hold the city," the *Sieur* declared. "I owe allegiance to no one else — not even to the very impressive chevalier on the wyvern."

"Yes," the herald replied. "We were told you would say that. You are commanded to give the army of the alliance against the darkspawn every assistance in your power, as a loyal subject of Empress Celandine."

"I know of no Empress Celandine," replied de Flambard, from the safety of his thick walls and high towers. "Is that chevalier the Duke?"

"It is not," replied the herald. "That lady is the Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden, Bronwyn Cousland. It is to her you owe your salvation. And while you may not know of Empress Celandine, who is a friend and intimate of Queen Bronwyn and King Loghain, she knows about you. Consider if you wish hereafter to be her loyal servant — or her enemy."

De Flambard had been terribly impressed by the battle before the city gates, but he had no idea of the size of the force this "alliance" could command. If it was no more than a thousand or more, he felt he could easily hold Verchiel against them. If they were more... then he would have to be prudent. Furthermore, there were other large creatures on the plain before him, like men of stone or metal, and he did not know what they were – only that they were powerful. They did not seem vulnerable to arrows, and could likely breach the gates. And this... alliance... *had* solved his darkspawn problem... for the moment.

"I do not parley with underlings," he declared. "I will speak only to the leaders of this 'alliance.'" He punctuated his words by leaving the gate tower. However, he immediately swung down, and watched the herald through an arrow slit, invisible to the party.

The herald rode back and conferred with... yes, it must really be the Red Queen out there... She was much more impressive than any Fereldan had the right to be. And given the size of the army emerging out of the trees and moving on to the plain, he was just as glad he had not been rude to the envoy.

Especially so, since the Queen looked in his direction, and urged her terrifying steed to make for the gate. Her people followed her, warriors, wyverns, mages, stone-men, and metal-men alike. Maker, there were even *dogs* down there! It was not like an army at all, but something fantastic from a storybook.

The rest of the army, off in the distance, was approaching as well. Presumably Prosper de Montfort was among the horsemen in front. De Flambard had seen the duke once, but had never been presented to him, since the difference in their rank was so great. And the big man in silverite armor beside him. Maker! That really might be the notorious Loghain!

But here already was the Red Queen. De Flambard climbed back up to the tower to meet her. She pushed back her helmet and tossed it down to a dwarf, flashing her a brief winning smile. Then she turned her face to de Flambard and the smile was, alas, gone.

"You are the Sieur de Flambard, I presume?"

"I am he, Your Majesty. Everyone knows who you are."

"Good. That saves time. You have been holding this city against the darkspawn. As there are no darkspawn inside, I'll say, 'Good on you.' I understand you do not care much for Grey Wardens, but as Grey Wardens saved you today, I trust I won't hear the kind of hard words you had for my comrade, Senior Warden Riordan."

De Flambard shivered with dread. Oh... she knew about that, somehow. Did she know everything? Courtesy, at this point, was imperative.

"I am indeed most grateful for Your Majesty's timely arrival."

"So you should be. Open the gates. I daresay Duke Prosper will wish to confer with you about internal Orlesian affairs, and relay the commands of the new Empress-elect. As her allies, I believe my party will remain in our

nearby camp, and not tax your hospitality. I do have other demands of you, however. I want every suspected mage given into my custody. They are useful in battle. And I want you to open the gates of the Alienage at once."

He regarded her blankly, not quite understanding the relevance of elves to matters of war and state. The mages? It would displease the Revered Mother greatly, but of the two, he would prefer her wrath to that of the woman before him. Yes, the mages might be put to good use. But...

"The elves, Majesty?"

Bronwyn eyed him coldly. "You heard me. Your elves are imprisoned and starving in their Alienage. You cannot hide anything about the state of your city from me. I already know everything. Open the gates. Some of my own people will be visiting the Alienage. Do not dream of contradicting me."

He did not dream of it. He thought of himself as a hard man; a brave man; even a ruthless man. He also thought he was not stupid, or a bad leader of his own men; nor did he wish harm to the citizens of Vercheil, whom he protected. If the Red Queen wanted the mages and the elves for her own purposes, she was welcome to every last one of them.

"It shall be as you say, Your Majesty."

"I'm glad to hear it." She lightly slapped the neck of her fearsome mount, and spoke in an undertone that carried quite audibly to the listening ears of de Flambard and the Verchiel garrison. "If he hadn't been sensible, the Maker would have struck him down before the next dawn, most likely."

The wyvern huffed, in what sounded like an eerily malicious laugh.

Guards were posted to watch the western approaches to the city, alert for another darkspawn incursion. Most of the Fereldans returned to camp, wanting to have as little to do with Verchiel as possible. Loghain was entirely too twitchy to tolerate staying in the palace, and Bronwyn saw little benefit in it. She had brought a bathtub in a wagon, and their camp bed was perfectly comfortable.

A party of Wardens did enter the city in order to collect the mages. There was brief unpleasantness at the Chantry, but it did not last long. The Wardens seemed to already know where the mages were being kept, and practically led the way there. It all smacked of dark sorcery to the Templars, but no one wanted to fight to the death for a handful of apostates and maleficarum. Let the Fereldans have them, and be cursed by them. A proclamation was also posted in the market that offered army service to any mage who wished to join the alliance. The gates would be open until the army left. If they wished to seek sanctuary, they must do it now.

There was only a brief window of opportunity for the elves as well. There was a very populous Alienage in Verchiel, and great hunger and misery there. They could be given some victuals, but were urged to leave the Alienage. The fit and willing could serve the army and perhaps volunteer for the Wardens. Others could travel to the

port of Lydes, avoiding the city of Lydes itself. There they could take ship for the elven homeland in Ferelden. They could choose either a four-day journey to West Hill, where they could follow the roads to the Brecilian Forest, or they could spend another eight days or so at sea, and be taken nearly to the homeland itself. If they wished to remain in Verchiel and starve, of course, that too was their choice.

There was a dwarven quarter in the city, also. The news that a Paragon of Orzammar was one of the leaders of the alliance thrilled them. No greater event could happen in their lifetimes. The dwarves of Verchiel streamed out, bringing tribute, offering their services. A line formed in front of Astrid's tent of dwarves who wished to see their Paragon for themselves.

Astrid, enthroned on a camp stool, welcomed them with royal grace. It was very pleasant to be a Paragon. Her ranks swelled with new recruits, and there were some fine craftsmen among them.

"Not all surfacers can adjust to life underground," she confided in Falkor. "I think I'll treat with Bronwyn for surface rights above one of our thaigs. A dwarven trading post with easier access to surface markets would be a fine thing for our people."

In her mind's eye, she could see the dwarven kingdom spreading out, the population growing, their power secure. She might even establish communications with long-lost Kal-Sharok someday, and the dwarves once more would be the united force they ought to be in the affairs of Thedas.



They would hold the Joining that night.

In their scouting expedition, Morrigan and Anders had spotted a deserted manor, not far from the south side of the city. It seemed a good venue to Bronwyn, and she sent an advance party to check it out for lingering darkspawn.

Danith reported it clear, after a brief skirmish.

"There were some half-dozen of the creatures, but no signs of digging."

Sigrun confirmed this. "A cellar, but no tunnels. There's quite a bit of room there, Commander. Plenty of room for the recruits to sleep it off, and a place where we can stow the bodies."

"All right," said Bronwyn. "Take a larger party with you and make it ready. Leliana knows where the Joining regalia is. The mages are tired, but maybe Tara and Niall can go and start working on the Joining potion. We'll move the recruits out at twilight. Remind them to bring their vials."

Next, she had to let Loghain know the plan.

"So they certainly won't be fit to march for another day or so."

"Not realistically. And quite honestly, the shape-shifters are tired. I recommend scouting the area around Verchiel and keeping it secure until the day after tomorrow."

They studied the map together. Verchiel seemed safe enough to the south and east, but was very vulnerable from north and west. A mounted patrol would be sent a short distance down the Imperial Highway which ran southwest toward Montsimnard. Another would venture along the Greenway.

"I mean to send some couriers to Montsimnard," Bron-

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wyn said, "but we need to get through the Joining first."

"Surely you don't need every single Warden to be present."

"No..." Bronwyn agreed, hesitating. "But I need quite a few in case of a panic. I'll join them in groups, just as I did before, since I've got — Maker! — I've got so many recruits! We'll need a lot of people there. Now that you bring it up, though, I agree that there should be some Wardens in that patrol on the Imperial Highway. If it seems safe enough, they could go on through to Montsimnard, after the rest turn back."

Thinking about it a little more, she came up with a roster. "Carver, Jowan, Clovis, and... Nevin. They should have an archer, and he sustained no serious wounds in the battle. They all ride well, and Carver and Jowan have experience dealing with foreign Wardens. They'll be sorry to miss the Joining, but we really need to know what's happening in Montsimnard."

"So you're really not going to Join?" Carver asked Fenris, disappointed.

"I am not," said the white-haired elf. "It is another leash, and I want no more of them. I am content to serve the Queen and her Wardens, but I will do so of my own free will, not out of compulsion."

"Well, then," Jowan said, more cheerfully. "Why don't you join us, instead?"

"I am not sure I understand you."

"We're going to try to get through to Montsimnard! Right now, while we've got the afternoon before us. If we

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ride hard and aren't challenged, we might make it before full dark. The King's sending out a patrol along the Imperial Highway. They'll escort us part of the way, and if it's clear, we'll keep on going. Come on!"



CORBUS BRYLAND, ARL OF SOUTH REACH

CHAPTER 17

TOWER OF SHADOWS



THE MESSENGERS

TO MONTSIMMARD, TOGETHER WITH THEIR ESCORT, GALLOPED SOUTHWEST ON THE IMPERIAL

HIGHWAY. BERTHOLD DE GUESCLIN, LORD OF CHATEAU CORBELIN, HAD BEGGED TO BE OF THE PARTY, FOR HIS HOME WAS HALF A DAY'S RIDE NORTH OF MONTSIMMARD, THOUGH NOT PARTICULARLY CLOSE TO THE HIGHWAY. In the end, Bronwyn allowed him to go with a dozen of his men.

They saw no one on the road. There were villages along the Imperial Highway in between Verchiel and Montsimnard, but they appeared to be largely deserted. If there were people in the huts and cottages, they were hiding from view. Nor did they see cattle or sheep, nor even chickens. Now and then they spotted a bewildered, abandoned dog, its ribs prominent. Some of them flinched away. Some tried to follow, barking hopefully. It was spring, but there were no farmers in the fields. There would be famine in the Heartlands if this were the pattern everywhere. Clovis, who knew this road, looked about him anxiously, shaking his head.

"This isn't right," he told them, as if they needed telling. "This is not normal."

De Guesclin said nothing at all, but his eyes were haunted. His men talked quietly among themselves. Some of them, too, had family at the chateau.

It was mid-afternoon when they came upon the first barrier on the Imperial Highway. The Wardens sensed no darkspawn nearby, so it was certainly the work of bandits. They kept their eyes on the trees on either side of the road, while the captain of the troop ordered four men down to move the overturned wagon and the crates aside. Silence surrounded them. They all sensed that they were being watched, but whoever it was did not wish a fight with twenty-seven armed men and a pair of mabarais. Magister and Lily growled, their heads down, and the foliage swayed against the wind, gently and quietly.

"We can go with you a bit farther," the captain murmured to Carver. "We'll need to turn back in a bit, but we can see you past this."

"No," said Carver. "Turn back now. If you come back through here in a few minutes, they'll be ready and waiting. Go now. We'll go on."

"If I see another barrier," Jowan muttered. "I'll blast it, and we'll ride on."

It was another hour before they saw the signpost marking the turn-off to Corbelin. Carver could not help sympathizing with De Guesclin, but thought riding into the

countryside was a reckless thing, under the circumstance.

"Why don't you come with us to Montsimnard?" he suggested. "If it's been bad this way, everyone might already have evacuated, and Montsimnard would be the sensible place to go."

He thought De Guesclin would shout at him, but the Orlesian pulled himself together, and then shook his head.

"No. No. I shall go home, and see what has happened. It is true that they would evacuate to Montsimnard if there were danger. My wife, Heloise, is a woman of good sense. First I shall go home."

The Orlesians rode down the ramp to the narrow dirt road that led west. De Guesclin gave a wave of farewell, and he and his men disappeared among the trees lining the way.

"I wonder if we'll see them again," said Jowan.

Nevin snorted. "I don't give much for their chances."

They rode on, and Jowan now and then cast Haste on them. It was a startling experience for Clovis, and Nevin had only heard about it and not experienced it for himself. The dogs loved it, and the horses appeared not to notice it at all.

Some distance on they came upon another village and saw signs of life. In this case, people were packing up a wagon, and hitching a sorry pair of oxen to it. Carver signaled a halt, and they trotted down to speak to the people, nearly getting shot for their pains. A tall boy with a bow drew down on them.

"Don't come any closer! I'll shoot!"

"We are Grey Wardens!" shouted Clovis. "We will do you no harm. We only want to ask if you have seen other War-

dens on the Highway."

The people by the wagons murmured among themselves. An old man, and old woman. A middle-aged man, face lined with worry. A girl of about twelve, and two boys, maybe six and eight. In the wagon, lying on a pallet, was a white-faced woman with a bundle in her arms.

"Maybe I can help her," Jowan whispered to Carver.

Carver put his hand up, well in sight of the boy archer. "Can we talk? We have a Healer with us."

They puzzled over his accent, but did not recognize it as Fereldan. These were peasants from the Orlesian Heartlands, so parochial that anyone from the next village was accounted a foreigner. The middle-aged man, evidently the woman's husband, frowned at them, but muttered something to the boy, who lowered his bow.

They approached slowly, making no threatening moves. When within speaking range, they dismounted, and led their horses forward. The people were plainly frightened, but knew the uselessness of trying to flee mounted armed men. The girl slid behind her father, peering out at them with large hazel eyes. She was rather pretty now, but the life of a peasant would soon enough render her as worn and faded as the woman in the wagon.

Jowan slipped past the others, and then past the man, with an apologetic glance. The elderly couple glared in suspicion.

"While our brother Warden sees to your woman," said Clovis, catching the husband's attention, "we want to ask

you what you have seen around here lately. Any Wardens on the Highway? Men in silver and blue?"

The man shook his head. "No. Soldiers, but not like that."

"How long ago?"

A debate ensued among the peasants. Many, many days, they agreed, but they did not agree about just how many. They had seen pikemen marching, and rich people in fine robes with handsome staffs, but no other Grey Wardens. It was perhaps at the beginning of the month, but they did not know what day it was. The rest of the village had fled ten days before. Darkspawn had attacked and made away with some women. Luckily the sick woman had just given birth and was safely indoors with her daughter at her side. Something had killed the sheep and cattle. All they had left were a pair of milk goats and the oxen for the wagon. They could not leave until today because the woman was too sick. She had begged them to leave her and save themselves, but they would not.

"Where are you going?" Carver asked.

"South. South. The creatures come from the north, so we go south, into the Dales. We have cousins in Thradaille."

Fenris said quietly, "Perhaps they should come with us to Montsimmard. There would be walls to protect them."

The peasants were horrified at the idea, horrified at being spoken to by an actual elf, and rather horrified that an elf had spoken up in front of the chevaliers. They expected him to be beaten for his impudence, but he was a strange creature, taller than they, armored and armed

like a chevalier himself.

"We will go to our cousins," the man mumbled, obstinate with fear.

"Fine, fine, go east and south," Carver agreed. "As far as you can."

Meanwhile, Jowan had examined the woman and the baby. Neither was in very good shape. The woman had lost a great deal of blood, and was feverish. She was not producing any milk, and the old woman and the girl were keeping the newborn alive with goats' milk.

The infection could be cured, and the damage from childbirth repaired fairly easily. A good dose of a healing potion would probably get the woman's milk started again. Jowan decided to see how she responded first to the potion before using visible magic. These people might react badly. He fetched the potion from his saddlebag, and poured it into his traveling cup for the woman to drink from. It was silver, a piece of loot, and the peasants were awed at the sight of it. Perhaps they thought it more important than the potion itself.

It seemed to do her a great deal of good. This pleased the family, obviously. Uneasily, Jowan put his hands on her belly and released his mana. A gasp rose up at the sight of the healing blue light. Lily, the dog, watched in awe, tail vibrating. Her human was best, the kindest, the noblest in the world.

"A mage!" whispered the oldest boy.

"Don't be afraid!" Carver yelled. "He's a Grey Warden! He's approved by the Chantry!"

Jowan tried to take the baby, but the girl snatched it

away, eyes wild. Meanwhile, the mother sat up in the wagon, much improved. She put out her arms for the child, and the girl yielded it up reluctantly. Pleadingly, the woman lifted the whimpering infant to Jowan. He gave her a weak smile, and took the baby in one arm, and laid his other hand on the little body, reaching out with his senses for any problems. He did what he could.

"He needs food, mostly," he told the mother.

"It is a girl," she smiled, a little amused at him.

"Right. She needs food. Your milk should come in again. Give her all the milk she wants. Goat's milk, too, if she'll take it, but yours is best."

"I think you must be a very good man, Grey Warden," said the mother, taking a happier child back into her arms. "What is your name?"

"Er, Jowan."

"Then her name will be Joanna," said the woman.

"I thought she was Ronette!" protested the grandmother.

"Joanna."

The tips of Jowan's ears turned pink. Carver pulled him away, grinning.

While the allied army was very curious about what the Grey Wardens were up to, they were not permitted to spy. Both Fereldans and Orlesians were forbidden to stray toward the deserted manor where the Grey Wardens were welcoming the new members of the order. Guards were

posted, with strict orders to let no one through. Sunset faded to twilight, and it was time for the Joining.

The Warden auxiliaries were left in camp to their own devices. Morrigan, as usual, pretended not to care, and declared that she was busy washing her hair anyway. Zevran proposed a card game to Silas and Sten meditated upon the Qun.

Pepin whined until Quinn brought him along. He was, after all, a Grey Warden. Bronwyn was exasperated beyond words. The child's nightmares were already terrible: what would happen if he saw someone die horribly during the Joining? She had a word with Tara, who promised a sleeping potion for the boy in a cup of warm milk. He was a child, anyway, and should not stay up late.

Another thing she must take care of tonight: she would have to promote more Wardens. Alistair, Astrid, Danith, and Tara were Senior Wardens, but she should just go ahead and promote the rest of that first Joining, plus the others who had Joined before the big event at Ostagar. Anders would have to be a Senior Warden whether he liked it or not. Then Leliana, Brosca, Adaia, Carver, Jowan and Oghren. She really had no idea what kind of command structure the Wardens had, but she wanted these individuals to enjoy some recognition.

How many of her recruits would survive? She had no idea, but the improved potion should make a great difference. She thought briefly of Avernus, the malignant old spider in his web. He was a dangerous creature, but she

owed him a great deal.

The recruits were gathered by a bonfire in the manor courtyard. Building it had allowed them to throw a great deal of trash into the blaze, and had considerably cleaned up the courtyard in the process. The pyre for those who did not survive was being built a little way away, but would be directly behind this bonfire in line of sight from the camp, thus eliminating some questions.

Inside, the little hall had been more or less put in order. The darkspawn had been through there, but had not stayed long. A good fire blazed forth, taking the chill off the spring night. Tables were righted, and the candlesticks arranged and the candles lit. The Joining potion was in a tall goblet. To either side of the hall, rooms had been arranged for the living and the dead. Leliana felt the living should at least have the comfort of a blanket between them and the hard stone. Later on, they would put a big pot of porridge on the fire to feed the mob of Wardens and the recruits as they awakened.

While Bronwyn believed that the recruits needed to continue acclimating with every race, there was no time to arrange them artistically in diverse groups for purposes of the Joining. All the dwarves wanted to be in the Paragon's Joining group, and as there were eight of them, that was feasible. Oghren would help Astrid keep order. She would let that party go first, out of respect for Astrid's title and prestige among her own people.

The non-magical elves were split into two groups, and were under the supervision of Danith and Adaia. Only two were Dalish. Bronwyn had never joined any city elves other than Adaia, and was curious about how they would conduct themselves. Most had done decently in the battle.

The largest single party were the mages, both human and elven. Around half were from the Fereldan Circle. Those all knew Tara and Anders, and mages seemed to do well in the joining anyway, so there would be two groups of them.

There were also the non-magical humans, under the care of Alistair and Leliana. Some of them were quite ill from the Blight, and Bronwyn hoped for the best for them. If Pepin could survive, surely some of them could as well.

Speaking of Pepin...

"Quinn! You're supposed to be watching Pepin! Keep him away from the candles."

The little boy was fascinated by the preparations. He had had no real ceremony himself, but simply a dose of potion, and remembered nothing about it anyway. He vibrated around the mysterious-looking room, bursting with questions.

"Are those candlesticks gold? Is that wine in the big cup? Do I get to taste it? Why is it taking so long? Why is everybody so serious? Isn't the King coming? Are we going to sleep here all night? Will we all have bad dreams about the dragon?"

Bronwyn grabbed a bony little shoulder as he ran past, and pulled him up in front of her. She leaned over to look him in the eye, and the boy shrank back, intimidated by her green eyes.

"Pepin!"

"*Oui, Madame?*"

"This is a very serious occasion and you have to behave yourself. You will stand with Quinn when the recruits come in and you cannot say one word."

He took a breath for another question, but she cut him off.

"Not one word. Yes, we're going to sleep here tonight. Maeve brought your blanket. It's in a room upstairs. The candlesticks are gold, and you mustn't touch them until you're grown up. You also can't talk about any of this to anybody except Wardens."

"Not anybody?"

"No."

"Not even Arl Corbus? Not even the King?"

"Not even the King, and certainly not Arl Corbus. This is just for Wardens. I'm serious. If you chatter to other people, you will be punished."

"I'll get a whipping?"

"The worst whipping of your life. And we would be very, very disappointed with you."

That sobered him. "I promise to be good!" He ran to Quinn, and the older boy put a hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Pepin. Let's help them take the rest of the blankets upstairs."

Very soon, everything was in order, and they could start. Bronwyn called in all the Wardens who were not supervising recruits, and had a word with them. She glanced

over at Quinn and Pepin, and said, "Please go and make sure the kitchen is ready. I'm not sure we remembered to bring those honey cakes. Go and see, and come right back." She gave Quinn a meaning look. "And Pepin should drink the cup of milk that left Tara left for him."

The boys dashed off to the kitchen. The honey cakes should delay them long enough.

"All right, Wardens, this won't take long. Brosca here stands as my second today – "

Brosca swelled with pride at that.

" – and she understands what has to be done. I am relying on you as well. We all hope and pray that all our recruits will survive this ordeal. However, it is likely that some will perish. I am assigning teams to care for each recruits as they go through the Joining. Toliver and Aeron, Cathair and Darach, Hakan and Soren: it will be your responsibility to break the recruits' fall. After the group is Joined, take them to either the room to my left if they die, and to the salon to my right if they survive. The rest of you must bear witness and help them as needed. Some recruits might be panicked by the sight of the Joining. They cannot change their minds. They must Join, or they will die. If they try to fight or flee, they must be brought to reason, and quickly. There is no turning back once they enter this room."

Aveline spoke up. "Does that ever happen?"

"It happened at my own Joining," Bronwyn said frankly. "Alistair was there. The first recruit died, and the second tried

to escape. The Warden-Commander ran him through. Then it was my turn. I had quite a bit to think about, I can tell you."

There were grim laughs. Maeve did not laugh, remembering how frightened she had been herself.

"We'll help them," she promised. "If anybody's scared, I'll hold their hand."

"Whatever it takes," Bronwyn agreed. "Now, where are those boys? Someone bring them here, and make them wash their sticky fingers!"

They were at last in some sort of order, and quiet, and Bronwyn nodded to Brosca to open the door. Pepin was already nodding off. Maeve found a bench, and let the boy lean against her.

Astrid entered, followed by the dwarven recruits and Oghren bringing up the rear. In a moment, Bronwyn was reciting the words of the Joining:

"Join us, brothers and sisters, join us in the shadows where we stand vigilant, join us in the duty that cannot be forsworn..."

The improved potion made quite a difference. It did not save all the recruits, but they had a much higher proportion of survivals this time. Bronwyn had hoped that all the mages would make it, but they had not. The apostates had done marginally better than the Circle mages. Nonetheless, there were now thirty-seven new Wardens. They had more than doubled their number. That was something to celebrate, while they mourned their losses. The casualties had

been highest among those already afflicted with Blight disease, which surprised no one. The two Templars had survived, and at some point Bronwyn would have to discuss their lyrium habit with them. Since the surviving recruits would sleep for hours, they took care of the dead. Most of the bodies were laid on the pyre, and Leliana recited a bit of the Chant for them before it was set alight. The two Dalish who had died were buried, according to their customs, and young trees planted over their graves.

No doubt there would be questions, but that was just too bad. Greagoir and Irving would ask after every one of their people, but Bronwyn was not obliged to tell them anything. Besides, they would be moving out soon, and everyone would be too busy to pry into Grey Warden affairs.

Bronwyn took out her roster and began writing in the new names, marking the dead as appropriate. She was particularly glad that both Ostap and Bustrum had survived the rite. They had seemed perfect candidates to her, but there were mysteries to the Joining that she had not yet plumbed. Brosca was pleased too: as pleased as a new mother whose infants have done something adorably clever.

The next official pay date was not until Summerday at the end of Bloomingtide. She would give all the new recruits a prorated payment from today until then. Who knew how many of them would actually be alive to celebrate Summerday? Bronwyn decided to announce the promotions to Senior Warden once everyone was awake.

Without their escort, the Warden party galloped on, hoping to reach Montsimnard before dark. The countryside flashed past: some fields tentatively green, some showing ominous streaks of greyish black. Even the green was not a good sign, if one looked closely; for it was the not the green of sprouting crops, but the green of weeds taking what had been productive land.

Darkspawn attempted to ambush them at one bend in the road, but surprised by their speed, missed all their bowshots. It was a small band of scouts, and Carver considered riding past, but even a small band of darkspawn could do great harm. They pulled up with an effort, turned and charged down on the creatures. Jowan, true to his word, shot a fireball that knocked the creatures flying. It was an impressive feat from horseback at the gallop. Nevin shot a hurlock in the face, and the scabby head smashed back against the retaining wall of the Highway. The dogs, too, did their part. They were still growing, but were already big and strong and unafraid.

Clovis seemed rather impressed that they had managed to deal with the darkspawn without dismounting or without their horses shying and panicking.

"I think the dogs help," said Carver. "If the dogs aren't afraid, the horses will follow. Not always, but I think the road under their hooves helped, too."

"And the fact," Fenris added, rather drily, "that the crea-

tures were downwind of us, and thus the horses could not pick up their odor."

Carver laughed. "That's true!"

They rode on, wanting to get to Montsimnard before full dark. At Haste, it was impossible to talk, so they galloped on in silence, watching the road ahead and to the sides.

They were in rolling country now, which forced them to slow a bit. It would be too reckless to dash over the top of a blind hill, not knowing what was just below the crest. Then too, they were forced to stop and rest the horses when they crossed a stream that seemed free of Taint.

Another hill, and the distant city of Montsimnard was revealed in the last golden rays of sunset. The riders drew rein to admire it instinctively. It was well worth looking at.

The name was true enough; or at least, if the city was not built on a mountain, it was built on a wide, broad outcrop of granite. A high hill, then, and an ancient settlement, for the natural defenses were clearly superb, and they had been improved by the finest engineering into something truly formidable.

"So that's Montsimnard," Carver said. "The darkspawn would be hard put to it to crack *that*."

Clovis shook his head. "And yet they did – in the Third Blight. The Archdemon Toth stretched its wings over Orlais, and Montsimnard burned. This fortified city rose from its ashes: bigger, stronger."

Jowan pointed to a massive white tower that soared over the

rest of the city. "Is that the Circle of Magi in Montsimnard?"

"No. That is the *Tour des Ombres*. You know that in Orlesian, the Grey Wardens are called *Les Gardes des Ombres*. It is the watch tower of our order in Orlais."

"Tower of Shadows," smiled Carver. "That's... poetic."

Clovis pointed to a round structure. "The Circle is housed over there — in the circular building. It has a round courtyard inside, too. The mages take their exercise there, for they aren't allowed out of their confinement often, unless they are conscripted."

"A fine city," Fenris approved. "The moat is full. Is it deep?"

"Aye, it is," Clovis assured him. "Very deep, and the sides are smooth and straight. It is no easy matter to swim the moat, and even less easy to climb out of it. Once we raise the drawbridge, it will be well nigh impossible for darkspawn to storm the city; and the foundation is granite, which is too hard for their primitive mining skills."

"That's right," Carver said, remembering. "Soldier's Peak in Ferelden is built on granite too. That's why Commander Asturian built the Warden fortress in the Coast Mountains."

"Soldier's Peak?" Clovis asked. "I had not heard of this place."

Jowan elbowed Carver. Perhaps they shouldn't be talking so much. "Oh," Carver shrugged. "It's an old abandoned outpost we found. Empty for years."

Nevin, unimpressed by talk of architecture, spoke up. "Maybe we should get a move on. Just saying."

"Right."

They spurred their horses forward, and the dogs ran silently at their heels, glad that today's journey was almost over.

Intervening hills blocked their view of the city as they rode, but when it was once again revealed, they saw a lot of activity on the walls and in front of the gate that faced the Imperial Highway.

A figure rose up from the underbrush some distance from the road and hailed them.

"Wardens!"

Cautiously, they drew rein and turned to look for the speaker. Clovis' reluctant smile burst forth, and he jumped from his horse, striding forward.

"Riordan!"

The Senior Warden of Jader was not alone, but with a patrol of six other Wardens. Clovis knew them all, of course, and after greeting Riordan with an embrace and a kiss on each cheek, he saluted the others likewise as well. Carver and Jowan glanced at each other from the corners of their eyes, uncomfortable with Orlesian physicality. Nevin diplomatically changed a snort to a cough. Fenris looked on impassively. All nations had their own ways, from Tevinter to the Fog Warriors of Seheron; from the Qunari to the peoples of the Free Marches. He had found Fereldans as different from the rest as the others, and the fact the Orlesians had such a ritual greeting was no longer odd to him after traveling from Jader to Montsimnard. Only the Fereldans would persist in finding it bizarre.

"You found Bronwyn?" Riordan asked Clovis urgently. "Will she come?"

"She is almost here," Clovis assured him. "She is in Verchiel as of this moment, and these brothers," he gestured to the Fereldans, "have come with me to hear news of the order in Orlais."

He then introduced the Wardens, and then nodded to Fenris. "This is our comrade Fenris, an estimable warrior. He has not yet decided to Join us, but fights well at our side."

"Welcome! Welcome all you," Riordan said, his dark, bearded face brightening in the joy of meeting other Wardens. He repeated their names carefully. "Carver... Jowan... Nevin... and Fenris. And your fine hounds, as well. You are most welcome in Montsimmard. Come. The night draws on, and we shall all be safer within the city's walls."

He debriefed them as they walked, wanting to know the number and kind of any darkspawn they had seen on the road, the situation in Verchiel, how many Wardens Bronwyn had brought with her, and the size of any support troops that had escorted her west. He made no bones about admitting that she had surpassed his hopes.

"And she was able to persuade the Sieur de Flambard to open his gates? That is more than I could manage!"

"She was sitting astride a wyvern at the time," Carver told him. "That probably helped."

Riordan looked rather blank, and some of his men chuckled, imagining that Carver was joking.

Clovis shrugged. "She was, indeed. It's a long story. She

put the fear of the Maker into that fool. Darkspawn menaced the city, but Queen Bronwyn led the Wardens against them. De Flambard then opened his gates and many fled the city. Some volunteered to Join us. She is having a Joining this very night. Meanwhile, patrols are going out to scout the country around their. They are thinking of moving up to the Orne."

"Then you must share what we learned before they march into another disaster!" Riordan tensed. "The army first... and then most of the Wardens of Montsimmard... I will tell you more, but after you have dined."

Montsimmard gave the impression of being a far older city than Jader. That was not actually true, for there had been a little seaside village at Jader a thousand years before, but a great many of that city's beauties and improvement were the work of rulers in the Blessed Age. Montsimmard had kept the shape it had assumed at the end of the Towers Age, after the reconstruction following the Third Blight. That made the public buildings of Montsimmard five hundred years older than the green fantasies of the Emerald City. Some structures in Ferelden were as old, or even older, most especially Kinloch Hold and Fort Drakon, but the Tower of Shadows was also the work of ancient peoples.

"it is the earliest Grey Warden structure outside the Anderfels," said Riordan, "and one of the few buildings in Montsimmard to have survived the Third Blight."

Jowan, having spent most of his life in the Circle of

Magi at Kinloch Hold, was at once uneasy and perfectly familiar with the concept of a life lived vertically. It would be a long way up from the base of the tower to the crenelated top. Still, the view would be worth it.

The general atmosphere within Montsimnard was tense and anxious. Everyone seemed to know Riordan, and most greeted the Wardens in a friendly enough way, but everyone also looked worried. In the Market, a handful of Templars were gathered outside the very old Chantry, glancing the Wardens' way with thinly veiled hostility. Not far away was the curious round building that put them all in mind of a beehive, massive and constructed of rough grey stone. That was the Montsimnard Circle, built quite close to the Chantry itself.

"How many mages live there?" Jowan asked quietly. He would love to get in and see for himself, but decided he would wait until he had the authority of his superiors to go in. They likely had a fabulous library, and they also might be home to mages who would prefer to be elsewhere.

"Not many, any more," Riordan said. "Many left with the Montsimnard Wardens, and Orlais did not have a full complement of Wardens to begin with. No one was expecting a Blight."

Once inside the city gates, it became clear that the Grey Wardens possessed more than an old tower. In fact, the Grey Wardens occupied a city within a city. There was an inner wall and an inner gate leading to the most impressive section of Montsimnard. The Tower of Shadows was fronted

by a long stone hall pierced with a metal-shod double door and tall pointed-arched windows. Surrounding an impressive square in front of that building, and ranged along the narrow streets leading off from it, were stables and armories, workshops and smithies, taverns and brothels, shops and private dwellings. The Warden's Quarter in Montsimnard alone had room for a thousand Wardens, and with them wives and children, servants and artisans, parasites and whores. The rest of the city could readily accommodate the allied army. Montsimnard had always been a garrison town.

Servants came to take their horses, and others began unloading what little gear they had brought with them.

"It will be taken to your quarters," said Riordan.

They were not led directly into the tower, but through the long, imposing building instead. An entrance hall was decorated with banners overhead. Through a door was a long gallery, the walls of which were covered with portraits of Wardens of times past, and some fairly splendid paintings of great battles. They paused before one, which was simply immense. In a dark and roiling sky, white griffons did battle against a vast and tainted Archdemon. Tiny figures fell to their deaths from their wounded mounts. Below, a sea of darkspawn charged desperate heroes in a nightmare struggle of evil against good.

"The Battle of Ayesleigh," said Nevin, reading the label. "That's really something. I could look at that all day and see something different."

"Many of the figures are said to be painted from life," Riordan told them. He pointed to the upper right. "That is Garahel on Moranth."

"Bloody great shame about the griffons," muttered Carver. "But riding on wyverns was pretty neat."

Riordan shook his head. "I'll want to hear more about that. But first, I'll have the housekeeper show you your quarters. The supper bell should ring soon. I can introduce you to some of the others then." He gestured to the Orlesian. "Clovis, come with me."

The guest quarters were quite large and comfortable, though they were all in the same room. These, of course were not "guest quarters for visiting dignitaries," but "guest quarters for visiting Wardens." Four neat but narrow beds were arranged along a whitewashed wall, and their gear was piled at the foot of each. There was even hot water for washing. They set to with good will.

"Some place, eh?" chuckled Nevin, as he scrubbed the road filth away. "Pretty fancy."

"Actually, I think the Nevarran set-up is better," Carver said, slipping on a fresh shirt. "I haven't seen all this all yet, but I'll bet they don't have a place to swim."

Jowan agreed. "The Nevarrans seemed more cheerful, too. Of course, their country's capital hadn't been blasted by the darkspawn, either."

Soon, a distant bell sounded, and a young Warden knocked on the door.

"I'm to lead you to the Great Hall."

They fell into step behind him, walking quickly, attracted by the savory smells. The Warden ahead of them opened the door, and announced them.

"The Grey Wardens of Ferelden: Carver, Jowan, and Nevin, and their companion, Monsieur Fenris."

"Whew!" Nevin whistled, looking about him. "Now *this* is what I call refined."

"Shhh!" Jowan gave him a hard nudge.

The Great Hall of Montsimmard was fairly amazing, even for men who had seen the glories of Jader and the splendors of Nevarra. A great deal of coin had been spent on this chamber, over many ages. The vaulted ceiling was gilded in places, and the floor was polished marble. At the head table, Riordan stood by a throne-like chair. In all that vast place there were only some fifty or so Wardens.

"You will sit here, if you please," the young Warden said, gesturing them to some places at a table running perpendicular to Riordan's. "But do not sit until His Imperial Highness enters."

He left, while the astonished Wardens mouthed "*His Imperial Highness?*" at each other.

Only moments later, "*His Imperial Highness, Prince Florestan*" was announced.

Being a prince, he was surrounded by a retinue of advisers and bodyguards, pressing close beside and behind him. One of them hissed, "You should be announced as Emperor! It is an outrage!"

Fenris raised an eyebrow, wondering what a rival claimant for the throne of Orlais would do to Queen Bronwyn's alliance.

The prince and his followers swept past, the prince and one of his men going to join Riordan, and the rest taking places at another table. Carver was glad of that, since he was wildly curious, and wanted to talk about them behind their backs.

The Prince took the gilded chair beside Riordan, and everyone else sat down. Carver rolled his eyes at his friends. Among her Wardens, Bronwyn did not demand such formality, and she was a *queen*.

"Typical Orlesians," he muttered. Jowan elbowed him, too.

"We're eating their food," he softly admonished.

Well, that was true, but Carver was still put out. The Prince was even wearing a mask. It covered the upper part of his face, including his nose, and swept down to the jawline on either side. Only his mouth was uncovered, allowing him to eat without removing it. It was a fairly elaborate mask, too: silverite and leather, boldly enameled in purple and gold. He was the only one in the room wearing a mask. Maybe it was a princely thing.

Food was served, luckily, and the Wardens had no thought for lesser interests. It was all very good, and not ridiculously elaborate. When the first edge of their hunger was blunted, they overheard Riordan mention them by name.

"— and our brave Fereldan brothers have come with good news, my prince. If I may present them..."

They stood and bowed in the prince's direction. He gave

them a nod, but because of the mask it was impossible to read his face. Beside him was a man in rich garments, whom it was easy to guess was a noble and not a Warden. He looked the Fereldan contingent with a hard, dissatisfied expression.

"There's going to be trouble," sighed Jowan.

"Oh, really?" snorted Carver. "You think?"

They enjoyed their meal, nonetheless, and introduced themselves to the Wardens at their table. Most of them were from Jader, and thought very well of Riordan. One taciturn, scarred fellow was presented as a "survivor from the Montsimmard Wardens." This begged the question of what he had survived. and they soon had the whole story.

It was not a happy one. Hearing it, Carver wished more than ever that Wardens still had griffons.

The Montsimmard Wardens had found the remains of the Imperial Army. That the Fereldans already knew. What they did not know was what had followed, which was a horrific ambush by the darkspawn north of the Orne. The Wardens had sensed the darkspawn, indeed, but they had not sensed all of them until too late. The Warden-Commander of Orlais and his brother were killed, and many of their Wardens with them. The troops that had joined with the Wardens had been decimated. It was thought that there had been survivors, but that they had either hid in the marshes south of the river, or had fled west. The surviving Wardens fell back on Montsimmard. They had fought well enough that the pursuit was not

very determined. Some darkspawn had wandered over the Orne bridge, but had dispersed, and probably were the creatures the Fereldans had fought at Verchiel.

Some Wardens had been cut off from the rest, and those who had managed to survive had trickled in many days later. Some who were thought to be alive had not been seen at all. Riordan, arriving at the Orne, had rounded up a few survivors, as well as some refugees. That was, in fact, where they had found Prince Florestan and his little band of followers. And then the Wardens had made an attempt to get through to the city of Val Foret, but none of the Orlesians wanted to talk about that.

"Riordan will tell you himself."



And so he did, but not until he had questioned his guests. After supper, they were taken to a chamber high in the Tower of Shadows. There, they found themselves brought before a council of sorts: Riordan, some of his most experienced Wardens, some local nobles, and Prince Florestan. With the prince were Corot, his right-hand man, and one of his bodyguards, a huge, silent man the prince addressed as Ursus.

The first bit of information that had the Orlesians upset was the news that Jader was now part of Ferelden. Riordan listened impassively, but most of the others were quite indignant that the Fereldans would take advantage of the Blight in such a way. Carver thought they were shameless hypocrites, but he was not there to get in a fight.

"And you have allied with local Orlesians?" Riordan asked.

"Well... yes. The most prominent is Duke Prosper – "

"Prosper de Montfort!" shouted Corot. "The man is a traitor! He is known to be in Fereldan pay!"

Carver rolled his eyes. "I don't think Fereldan could afford to pay him, actually. He's really rich. No, he came and joined up with us, and he's done a good job talking a lot of the locals into helping against the Blight." He decided that he might as well tell them the truth. "Once they know that he's speaking for the new Empress – "

That got everyone's attention.

Prince Florestan asked, "If I may... what Empress would that be?"

Jowan and Nevin were wincing. Carver wondered if he'd gone too far.

"Princess Celandine. She's the oldest of the three princesses. They call her Empress-elect. It was my understanding that she had the best claim."

"I knew it!" Corot exploded. "I knew that some bastard would make use of one of those little – "

"Corot," the prince cut him off quietly. "Do take care as to how you speak of a lady, and one of the few members of my remaining family."

"But Your Majesty – "

"I am not the Emperor," Florestan said. "Celandine's claim is better than mine. If she wants to be empress, why should I challenge her? Maker help her." He turned his

masked face to the Fereldans. "Is she with the army?"

"No, Your Highness," said Carver. "She's safe in Jader with her sisters. The old countess who used to be their keeper tried to have them killed when we took Solidor, but we fought off the assassins."

A brief silence, marked only with Corot's furious puffing. Then Prince Florestan spoke. "So Celene left instructions to kill them rather than let them be taken. Once that would have surprised me. I am glad they are safe, even though they are prisoners."

The Fereldans were somewhat confused. Jowan ventured. "I don't think they *are* prisoners... exactly. Queen Bronwyn would never let anyone treat them badly. I got the impression that they are enjoying life in Jader."

"Ah... Queen Bronwyn," said the prince, an oddly sad inflection in his voice. "I have every confidence in that lady's honor. I witnessed myself how those who sullied her name were punished. And *she* is with the army, I take it?"

"Leading from the front, Your Highness. She's united all the people using the Grey Warden treaties: dwarves, elves, mages. Now the Fereldans and Orlesians are fighting side by side. She found the Ashes of Andraste and she's ridden dragons and wyverns. She'll end this Blight, if anybody will."

The prince's mouth curled up in a half-smile. "Then perhaps everything was for the best. I should like to see her once in life, all the same."

"Your Highness," Fenris spoke up. "It is our understanding

that you were in Val Royeaux when it was attacked. It was feared that no one had survived, and yet you have. It will give hope to a great many in the army who fear for their families."

"They are right to fear," the prince said grimly. "If they had family in Val Royeaux, they must accept that there is a strong likelihood that they are dead. I survived only because of the strength and loyalty of Ursus there, not by any merit or virtue of my own."

Carver was sobered by the image. "You must have had a terrible experience."

"Ha. What I had was an epiphany, my friends. The world changed for me. I found that I was no safer from the hammerstrokes of Fate than any peasant. I became just a frightened man in a mob of frightened men. I saw my country, full of overweening pride, brought low by an enemy that could not be tricked with lies, swayed by prayers, or bought with gold. The Maker did not intervene to save me, nor to save innocent women and children. I saw men escape because they trampled on the decent and caring. I saw that my fancied swordsmanship and valor were dust in the wind. I survived because the son of my old nurse, my milk-brother, is a better man than I am, and because he is a man whose daily labor caused him to know a passage used by dairymaids and footmen that had not been discovered by the darkspawn."

Behind him, Ursus looked rather sheepish. Florestan noticed it and smiled, reaching out to pat the big man on

the back. "It's all true, my friend. You're a better man than I am." With a wry shrug, he added. "Prettier than I am too, now. I do not wear this mask as an affectation, I assure you, but to spare others the sight of my appearance and myself their horror. Amidst all we lost that night my good looks are certainly but a trifle, but I do rather miss them."

Ursus blurted out, "I don't think you look so bad."

All the men laughed, and not unkindly. It broke the tension, and Riordan had wine passed around.

Riordan said, "We will all be changed men before this Blight ends. Let us think of the best way to help this army that has come to our aid."

They discussed prospects for approaching the horde, which appeared to be very thoroughly entrenched north of the Orne, all the way to Val Royeaux. Riordan eventually told the story of how his Wardens had crossed the Orne and found a number of refugees, including the prince. They had not been far from Val Foret when they had been attacked by a large body of darkspawn, and had withdrawn, with heavy losses. They had fallen back on Montsimmard, and the arrival of the allied army was the answer to all their prayers.

More questions were asked about the party that had escorted them. Riordan knew Berthold de Gueslin, of course. Florestan knew the name but could not recall the man's face.

Carver said, "We tried to persuade him to come here with us, but he wanted to go home first. He's the lord of Chateau Corbelin. Do you know if everything's all right there?"

"Corbelin?" Riordan asked. "Yes, I know the place. It is well fortified. I tried to persuade Madame de Guesclin to come to Montsimmard, but she felt that she had a duty to hold the chateau for her husband. They were still alive the last time I was there, about mid-month, but the fields and flocks had been destroyed. I left four Wardens there as a observation post. If a large force attacks them, our lookouts at the top of the tower will be able to see the signal fire."

"I hope they're all right," said Jowan.

Carver was more interested in the idea of a signal. "You always have lookouts posted on top of the tower?"

"Always."

"Could we see?" Carver asked. "That must be quite the view. During the day."

"It is equally beautiful at night," remarked Prince Florestan. "The young Warden is right. Let us take our wine up to the top and enjoy the starlight."

It was a long walk up the winding stairs, but definitely worth it. The top of the tower was huge: wide and flat enough for griffons to land there. Carver supposed that had been the point, long ago. The stars were just coming out, and the sky was an immense bowl overhead. Riordan pointed to the north-north-east.

"There is Val Royeaux. Night after night we saw it burning. You can still see the smoke hanging above the city. Val Foret is there." He gestured just west of north. "So far we have seen no sign of a great conflagration, so we have

hope." He pointed off to a distant, wooded hill. "Chateau Corbelin is there. As you see, there is no signal fire."

Neither of them mentioned that the lookouts might not have seen a signal fire in the brightness of day, nor that darkspawn did not always set fire to the places they seized and render uninhabited. It was better to cling to hope, however slippery a spar that was.

Back at the camp near Verchiel, the Warden's escort returned at dusk, and reported what they had seen on the road to Montsimmard. No traffic; some bandit activity; no darkspawn. The captain showed Loghain the exact place on the map where he had parted company with the Wardens and De Guesclin's party.

"I can't claim I saw much danger, Majesty; but it all felt *wrong*. A road like that should have people on it, even in wartime. I got the feeling that anyone who could get out, had got out days ago and kept running."

Loghain dismissed him, and studied the map a little longer. Bronwyn would be gone all night, initiating those poor wretches into the Grey Wardens. He hoped she got some use out of them. He approved of a larger force of Wardens. The more Wardens she had, the better Bronwyn's chances of not being the one to have to put paid to the Archdemon. He was not so pleased about her accepting all these Orlesians into the Fereldan Grey Wardens. Perhaps she could leave the Orlesians here after the Blight was over.

How much farther should they march into Orlais? They had reached the edge of the Heartlands. Another day would put them into the Orne Valley. Beyond that Loghain was loath to go. The one thing they must not do is overextend themselves. They had a long, but not impracticable communication and supply line stretching back to Jader and beyond. How much farther could they stretch it? Word had come from the port of Lydes that more ships had arrived, and were staying in port, awaiting orders. Though that was certainly a help, there were many imponderables to concern him. The cooperation of the lord of Verchiel was not something upon which Loghain cared to stake his life. Lydes was held together only by the garrison Duke Prosper had placed there; the deputy ruling Halamshiral was not a strong man. They were all potentially weak links, and losing one of them would throw the entire campaign into crisis and possible catastrophe.

Depending on what they heard from Montsimmard, it might be a better base for their operations out here in the west, but it, too was dangerously far from Ferelden.

Much depended on what the patrol on the Greenway found, and they had not yet returned. Loghain was uneasy about them. They were going straight toward the source of the darkspawn. He traced their route along the map with his forefinger. Only so far, and no farther, and the moment they met resistance, they were to withdraw. It was useless to sit up all night for them. He decided to lie

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down and rest his eyes.

Voices approached his tent: excited talk was heading his way. Loghain blinked, and realized that he had slept for hours. Rousing himself, he listened to the voices. One sounded like Captain Travis, who had let the patrol up the Greenway. Loghain rose from his bed, threw on a tunic, and thrust aside the tent flap. The east was silver grey shading to rose. It was just before sunrise.

"What is it?"

"My lord king!" Travis was stirred up, clearly. "We were able to penetrate as far as the Orne Bridge. We saw darkspawn here and there in the distance on the way, but, as you commanded, did not pursue them."

"Show me where," Loghain ordered, beckoning the man into the tent. He gestured at the map, and Travis was able to point out the sites. Travis lowered his voice, to give the next news.

"We also came upon a small camp of soldiers near the Orne Bridge."

"Orlesian stragglers?"

"No, my king." Travis gave Loghain a grim look. "A small force of Qunari. They weren't particularly friendly, either, but we talked to them."

In the same pale morning light, the new Wardens began awakening to their new life: mages first, as usual. In the kitchen, with forced civility, Leliana and Maeve bickered over the seasoning of the breakfast porridge. It hardly mat-

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tered which spice was used. Everyone would be starving, and whether cinnamon or nutmeg was added, the porridge would taste infinitely better than darkspawn blood.



SENIOR WARDEN MAGE AVERNUS

CHAPTER 18



"LIKE GODS, WE LIVE FOREVER"

THE WARDENS OF ANTIVA REACHED JADER ON THE TWENTIETH OF DRAGONIS. The Marcher Wardens from Ansbarg arrived there four days later. The Rivainni Wardens had decided to go to Cumberland, and arrived there later still.

Warden-Commander Enzo Visconti of Antiva found Jader under Fereldan control, but could not complain of the Warden facilities in the city. The Compound had been left under the command of Warden Catriona, whom he found pleasant and business-like, and very pleased that Wardens had come to help.

Visconti was in his last years as a Warden, and expected his Calling at any time. He had resented the First Wardens sanctions against helping Ferelden very much indeed, and as soon as they were lifted, had hurried to take part in the only Blight he would ever see. However unconventional Warden-Commander Bronwyn Cousland was, she had performed some very impressive diplomacy in uniting the races and nations against the Blight. According to the couriers, she and her army were somewhere on the Imperial Highway, head-

ing ultimately toward the site of an Orlesian disaster on the River Orne. She should be easy enough to follow, if he got his people in order and hurried to support her. Though Antiva was famed for its horses, Visconti had brought none. Horses did not travel well by sea, especially on such a long voyage. Nor did horses deal well with darkspawn. Better to force-march the Wardens. A day of rest to get their land legs back, and they would go at all speed to join this Warden Queen.

Thus, the Antivans were already in Halamshiral by the time the Marchers were ready to leave Jader. The cities and villages along the Imperial Highway were bemused by the additional Wardens. It did quite a bit to keep them honest.

Riordan, his hopes very much raised by the knowledge that an army was not a day away and ready to stand with him against the Blight, began making new plans as soon as he awakened early the next morning. As people met for their breakfast, he outlined his ideas.

"My friends," he said to the Fereldan contingent, "perhaps you would care to go with me today on a patrol. We shall first check on the people at Chateau Corbelin and its village, and see if de Guesclin made it through safely to his home."

"I'd like that," said Carver. "Maybe we could talk them into evacuating here. This seems a lot safer than an isolated castle."

"Or at least the women and children could come," said Jowan.

"That is my hope," Riordan agreed. "They are exposed where they are, and who knows if the horde might not

come marching south? For that matter, I have little idea where the horde is. I now know they are not in Vercheil, thanks to you. I assume that quite a few remain in Val Royeaux. Other than that, I am nearly blind."

Jowan bit his lip. He wished he could shape-shift into a bird. Morrigan had bullied him into wyvern shape for the battle, and he felt he could manage that shape reliably on his own now, but the essential art of shape-shifting was difficult for him, and he did not think he could attain any shape, other than possibly a mabari, on his own. A bird was more helpful than anything else. Maybe he could find some way to persuade Morrigan to coach him into a hawk shape like hers. Then he could be a useful scout, too.

"We could have a look at Beau Rivage and Plaquemine while we're out," suggested a Warden.

"So we shall." Riordan explained to the Fereldans, "There are two other villages in the general area. They were supposed to be evacuated, and I know some of the people are here in Montsimnard, but they might still be inhabited by stragglers, looters, or even darkspawn scouts."

Fenris thought that was a sensible idea. "We saw people ourselves who evacuated late due to illness. Who knows if the old and sick are still hiding in their houses, unable to escape?"

A troubling notion, and the men ate in silence for awhile. The doors opened and the Prince arrived with his people to join them.

"You are going out today, Riordan?" Florestan asked, rather cheerfully.

"I am, Highness. A patrol out to Corbelin and the surrounding villages. I want to scout the area before I go to meet with our allies. I would like to find the army today, but if the patrol takes time, it will have to be tomorrow."

"A splendid idea! It would be good to know that Madame de Guesclin is safe. What would you say, Riordan, if I were to go with you?"

His adviser Corot appeared about to have a seizure. His bodyguard was resigned. Riordan tried to be tactful.

"Your Highness, perhaps it would be best if we first made certain the area was clear of darkspawn —"

Carver impulsively blurted out, "Don't go! I was at King's Mountain!" He blushed red, as all eyes turned to him. "Sorry, Your Highness, but I was at King's Mountain. What happened to King Cailan was horrible. It broke everybody's heart. Darkspawn don't care who they hurt."

Riordan said smoothly, "I would not have put it so baldly, Your Highness, but my young brother is right."

Florestan wanted to know more. "I know that darkspawn are no respecters of persons. I understand what a terrible, shocking event the fate of King Cailan must have been. You were at the battle yourself?"

"I was, Your Highness, and not far from the King. Then the ogre charged, faster than you could imagine. It snatched up the King in a huge fist and gloated over him, drooling. You can't imagine what it was like. My brother charged in and killed the creature. We fought off the darkspawn,

and we thought it was going to be all right, but later that night we learned that the King had contracted the Blight sickness, and then he died, after horrible suffering."

"Ah! I am sorry," said Florestan. "From all reports, your King Cailan was a brave and gallant young man. His death was much mourned at the Empress' Court." Which was perfectly true. Celene had regretted Cailan's death very much, though Florestan did not know all the reasons why. He added, still curious. "And so it was your brother who was the brave knight who challenged the monster? A noble deed!"

Carver was tongue-tied, exasperated at Adam's heroics coming once again to loom over him like a great stone golem. It was completely his own fault this time. He managed a choking, "Thank you, Your Highness."

Jowan tried to help. "Carver's brother is Adam Hawke, the Bann of the city of Amaranthine, Your Highness."

"I see!" Florestan thought he did, and felt even more comfortable and at his ease in this company. "A noble deed by one of noble family!" He was even more disposed to like the young Warden who led the Fereldans, and smiled. "I bow to your judgement, Riordan. I would not wish to make additional trouble for you. By all means, scout the area and see to the de Guesclins. However, if you find the danger minimal, I must really insist on traveling with you when you go to meet the formidable Red Queen!"

He chatted some more, and was quite pleasant with the guests, even going so far as to take notice of the dogs.

"Ah! The famed Fereldan mabaris! What splendid animals!"

Fenris hid his amusement, for this was the surest way to Carver and Jowan's good graces. For that matter, Nevin saw nothing odd about it. Instantly, the dogs were the topic of discussion and were properly presented to the prince.

"Your Highness, this is Lily, and this fellow is Magister – "

"Magister?"

"The dogs were prisoners of some Tevinter blood mages, but we rescued them and gave them good homes."

"So I see! You have had your share of adventures, my friends."

More pleased with the result of Carver's outburst than not, Riordan gathered some ten Wardens of his own, and with the Fereldans and their friend Fenris they soon rode out of Montsimnard. After some distance they turned north to Chateau Corbelin and its nearby village, also named Corbelin.

Riordan was not so pleased that the prince wished to travel with them when they went to meet with the leaders of the army, but he saw no way to refuse. He himself was very eager to meet with Bronwyn, offer Montsimnard as a base, and get a feel for her plans.

So far, they sensed no darkspawn, nor did they see signs of Taint. The dogs were useful creatures, and Riordan saw the sense in using them in such a manner. Perhaps that was something that could be considered here in Orlais someday.

They had been lucky, which was good and bad. Montsimnard had not been made the Archdemon's target. If they

were lucky, it meant that somewhere, others were not so lucky. He was still smarting over his failure to get through to Val Foret. He had sent Fiona with a patrol south on the Imperial Highway, to go all the way around Lake Celestine, warn the people in Val Firmin, and approach Val Foret from the south. So far, he had heard nothing from her.

Something occurred to him, and he called Carver over. As they rode side by side, Riordan lowered his voice. "Was the Joining tried on King Cailan?"

Carver made a face. "Yes. Alistair told me about it. It killed him. He was going to die anyway, so Bronwyn was desperate. They tried it, but it just didn't work, and then they cleared up all the evidence of it. And then, this poor old mage got blamed for everything, and some Templars tracked her down and killed her. It was all just awful. King Loghain told him not to fight, but he wouldn't listen."

"Ah. I am sorry. It would have been interesting, had it succeeded. Then we would have had a Warden King instead of a Warden Queen."

"I think we're better off with a Warden Queen," said Carver. "She's a real hero. King Cailan just thought he was."

Jowan gathered his courage and remarked, "I notice, Senior Warden, that you don't seem to have many mages under your command. Is that usual?"

Riordan sighed, thinking back over old quarrels. "It's true. The Chantry has been difficult for many years about recruitment. Here, in the heart of the Chantry's power, we have had

to be careful. My senior mage is on a mission elsewhere, and my other mages were killed during our advance west of the Orne. Many mages from the Montsimnard Circle left with those Wardens, and we found none of them. They are either dead, or dispersed. The Revered Mother and the local Templars are not inclined to release any more to us."

"Can't you just... conscript them?"

Riordan laughed. "I could, though it is difficult to conscript without the individual's name. I supposed I could simply conscript the entire Circle, but there is no precedent for that!" He grew grim. "Granted, most of those left are too young or too old for the Wardens, but their ages would not save them if the darkspawn attack."

"Maybe a Warden could pay a visit, just to do some research in their library? That way you might meet some likely candidates."

"Not a bad idea. I'll consider it."

Chateau Corbelin showed no sign of the Taint, and after some disbelief, the inhabitants opened its gates, relieved to find that they were not forgotten. De Guesclin was there, smiling and happy, holding the hand of his lady and one of his little girls. Mathilde de Guesclin was no beauty, as her aristocratic heritage had made her rather horse-faced, but she was a pleasant, sensible woman, and was glad to make the Wardens welcome.

"I feel obligated," said De Guesclin, "to return to the army, but I want my wife and children to be safe. Can you wait

a few hours while we pack? The women and children of the castle, too? Mathilde says most of the village is gone."

"Pack," Riordan said. "We will check out the village and also do a sweep by Beau Rivage and Plaquemine. When we return, we will go to Montsimnard together." Shrugging, he turned to Carver. "I suppose that we will not be seeing Bronwyn until tomorrow."

Once her new Grey Wardens were awake and fed, it was time for Bronwyn to give them The Talk. Quinn and Maeve took Pepin outside to play, since he was too young to understand this, and would become restless.

Most of the new Wardens took the news of the changes in their lives fairly well. The dreams, the hunger, the ever-present duty: these were balanced by the ability to sense darkspawn and the additional strength, speed, and stamina. Bronwyn overheard one Circle mage tell Tara, "Better to be good for something than to be good for nothing."

Bronwyn talked to them at length: assuring them that they would have food, shelter, clothing, and family with the Wardens for the rest of their lives. They would never be cast off. If they were mages, they would be protected by the Wardens from the Chantry. Elves, dwarves, and humans were equally Wardens. No Warden was another's servant. As Wardens, they should address her as Bronwyn, or as Commander. Then too, Wardens were paid according to rank, not according to race. The new recruits were all due good

coin from the day before to Summerday, the next pay date.

This all went down well. Less happily received was the news that their fertility might be somewhat affected. A Warden mage, she told them, had somewhat improved the potion, which had kept a higher proportion of them alive than in the past, and might have solved the fertility problem, but that was as yet unknown. She also told them about the Calling, and that the potion might counteract that as well.

"However, it's all experimental. I'd prefer you didn't discuss it with Wardens from other countries, lest we raise false hopes. There is the central matter of being a Warden that I must still reveal to you. This is the greatest secret of the order, and the reason for our existence. Listen well, and then seal your lips. Blabbing Warden secrets calls for the harshest punishment."

Which led her into a digression about her rules for Warden behavior and her prescribed punishments. There was nothing there that sounded excessively harsh or unreasonable to anyone, whether they were soldiers, mages, or unlucky citizens dragged into an unplanned war by the Blight. The mildest punishment was loss of pay – or at least Bronwyn deemed it the mildest punishment. To the people before her, it was a serious matter.

A city elf muttered to his friend, "Nobody wants to miss out on that kind of coin!" This evoked mutters, which were entirely of agreement. Young Warden Boniface tried to look haughty, but to a penniless young nobleman, the amount



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of pay sounded good, too. His bitch of a grandmother, of course, would want him to send it all to her. He wondered if the Queen would make him obey her. He hoped not.

"All right," said Bronwyn. "Ordinarily this important secret is not revealed to new Wardens until they've served for a year. We want to make sure you settle in and don't run away. We don't want to panic you, for that matter. Still you've all faced darkspawn, and you all survived. You've seen they can be killed. You'll all do your part in the Fifth Blight, and that's something to be very, very proud of. So here it is:

"Only a Warden can kill the Archdemon." She let her words sink in for a moment.

Bustrum looked puzzled, and said, "But Lady... everyone knows that. Only Wardens can end the Blight. This is no secret."

Bronwyn smiled, and did not correct him about his mode of address. That would take time. "The secret is in the why, my friend. For that matter, there are many who doubt the Wardens. There are many, like the *Sieur de Flambard*, who fancy themselves mighty heroes who do not need Grey Wardens to protect them. They are mistaken. Only Grey Wardens can end a Blight, because only a Grey Warden can kill an Archdemon. If anyone else were to attempt it, it could result in disaster for Thedas. Let me explain why. Pass the cider around. I don't know about you, but I find that storytelling is thirsty work!"

There was laughter... mostly quite cheerful. The good food and good drink had won the poor. Those who were



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used to as good or better were drawn in by the adventure and the chance for personal glory. They listened intently, waiting for the other shoe to drop, as it were.

"All right," said Bronwyn. "A brief history lesson. In the days of the First Blight, almost all of Thedas – surface Thedas – was ruled by the Tevinter Imperium, which claimed the greatest army the world has ever seen. And yet the First Blight lasted nearly two hundred years. How could the mighty Tevinters not kill a dragon, however big? There are Wardens here who've participated in killing two High Dragons, and numerous lesser dragonkind."

A dwarf duster lifted his cup in salute. "We know *you* have, Dragonslayer!"

"I never killed one alone," Bronwyn told them. "It's always been a group effort. In the Frostbacks five of us killed a High Dragon. One of us – our dear friend Cullen, a former Templar – died protecting us so we could get in the lethal blows. Still, it was a very big dragon and we killed it. I don't know how big Dumat was, but the Tevinters were unable to kill it, until the Grey Wardens came along. It ravaged all Thedas, and ultimately led to the collapse of the Imperium."

"Well..." Constant, one the Templars, temporized. "It was Our Lady Andraste who defeated the Tevinters."

"Very true," Bronwyn agreed, "but she wisely saw her opportunity in the weakened state of the Imperium in the wake of the First Blight. The world was exhausted, and it would have been far worse without the first Grey Wardens.

They drank the Joining potion just as you did, and with it came the power to end the life of the Archdemon. We still know the names of some of the heroes who saved our world: the lovers Corin and Neriah who killed the Archdemon Zazikel in the Second Blight; Caius Corvanni who killed Toth in the Third; the elven hero Garahel whose slaying of Andoral at the battle of Ayesleigh ended the Fourth Blight...

"Wait..." whispered a city elf. "There's an *elven hero*?"

"Shhhh," Adaia whispered back. "Maybe you can get Bronwyn to tell the story. It's really neat. Yeah, a real elven hero. Garahel."

"However," Bronwyn said seriously, "What can any of you tell me about the later careers of those heroes?"

"They didn't have later careers," said Brosca. "Cos they were all *dead*. Killed in the battle."

A questioning silence followed.

Bronwyn gave them a nod. "It's true, but there's more to it than that. I can't explain it all, because we only know a bit about the end of the Second, Third, and Fourth Blights. The Wardens who struck the killing blow perished. About the First Blight, all we know is that all the original Wardens were killed in the final battle. But as to the rest, every Warden who struck the final blow against an Archdemon died. And it has to be a Warden. Others thought they had killed the Archdemon Dumat in the First Blight, but it wouldn't stay dead. Its spirit traveled to the nearest darkspawn, and it rose again. The Old God's shape-shifting ability resulted in a newly reconstituted Archdemon.

That's why the First Blight went on and on."

Everyone was thinking hard. Bronwyn did not torture them with curiosity for long.

"A darkspawn is a soulless creature. A Grey Warden is not. It is thought that if a Grey Warden strikes the final blow, the Archdemon's spirit is drawn to that Grey Warden by their shared Taint. The souls meet and both Warden and Archdemon perish. It's the only way to win. I, for one, accept that challenge and that fate. If I must perish so that the world may live, so be it."

Some look horrified. Some — many more — looked enraptured. Bustrum and Ostap glanced at each other, and then nodded sagely. Bronwyn went on.

"But I can't do it alone. Once I learned how to kill the Archdemon, I understood why the Warden went aloft on griffons and surrounded the Archdemon. It wasn't just to kill the creature, but to prevent the disaster of someone who was not a Warden getting off a lucky shot that would appear to kill the Archdemon, but wouldn't. Imagine if that happened: everyone would be celebrating a dead Old God, while the actual Archdemon, possessing the body of a little genlock perhaps, crept out of sight until it could regather its strength and fall on the unsuspecting world with even greater fury. When we meet the Archdemon, we Wardens have got to get in and get close and do the job ourselves. The mission of the army with us is to engage the darkspawn and give us a chance at the Archdemon.

King Loghain knows enough to know that."

"Too bad we don't have griffons," said Boniface. "Now I understand why they were important, and not just for show."

"No, they weren't just for show," Bronwyn agreed. "Their purpose was to give the Grey Wardens an edge when fighting an aerial enemy. We no longer have that edge. In the future, we might be able to train wyverns – or better, dragons – to carry us. That's a long term project and we don't have time for it now. I have no idea why the Grey Wardens haven't done it, but there's no point in recriminations."

"If Carver were here," Aveline said, smiling, "he'd tell you about the time the Commander rode a dragon."

There was quite a bit of interest in this. Bronwyn laughed. "Some other time. It took off flying with me on its back. I do know that there are people who have managed to tame dragons, but as I say, that will be a task when the Blight is over and won."

"And now we have wyverns!" Sigrun declared, still thrilled at the memory.

"We have wyverns," Bronwyn nodded, "or rather mage wyverns. Our mages who could shape-shift gave us a great tactical advantage in the last battle. Wyverns, however, have a very limited flying range. They glide rather than fly. There are other tactics to use against the Archdemon. In our fight against one in the Korcari Wilds, we used ballistae with explosive bolts to damage the creature's wings and bring it down. It was still a very hard

fight, but I was able to get on its back and get at its brain through the back of its skull. I've noticed that dragons will usually land to attack an enemy, if they can. As soon as they do, you got to damage them in every possible way."

She then quickly described all the vulnerable points of a dragon, hoping it would sink in.

"Above all you have to destroy its ability to fly. In the Frostbacks, when the dragon was on the ground I was able to nail an explosive bomb to the dragon's wingjoint. It flew off, but came back to flame us again. Tara there hit the bomb with a fireball when it was still high in the air. The bomb blew the wing apart. Yes, that was quite the sight. The fall injured it so badly that we could finish it off."

Astrid spoke up. "That's why we have ballistae teams who can set up them up quickly and carriages for them that let us elevate them to shoot into the air. I want some of you to train with them. I think a ballistae bolt fired by a Warden would settle the Archdemon perfectly well, if it hit in a vital spot."

"I wonder..." said Niall. "You know that's less than a handful of events to judge from. Maybe the Archdemon's soul would be drawn to the Warden closest at the moment of death."

"An interesting idea," Bronwyn granted, "though that's not Warden lore."

Actually she thought that a very interesting idea indeed. Perhaps not all would be lost if some non-Warden caused the Archdemon to die. Nonetheless, a Warden must be close by, lest the Archdemon regenerate.

"You don't think..." Aadaia ventured. "You don't think that the Warden's *soul* is killed as well as the body?"

The dwarves, for the most part, rolled their eyes, Astrid among them. However frail the souls that animated elves and humans, surely the spirit of a dwarf was of stronger stuff, and would not disperse simply because of a collision with a lunatic dragon god. Nor were they the only ones who rejected the idea.

"No!" Leliana objected. "I do not believe that at all. A soul cannot be destroyed." She quoted:

*"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."*

"Well said," Bronwyn said, inclined to be optimistic about it, remembering her dream in which she had seen her family. "Nothing can destroy our spirits. For all we know, the Old God's spirit isn't killed either. Perhaps it, too, instead of a miserable existence in a Tainted, corrupt container, is freed to move on to spheres we can only imagine. Whether we go to the Maker, the Stone, or the Creators, death in this world is only the beginning. Like gods, we live forever."

A good exit line, but of course there were training arrangements to make, and responsibilities to assign. And there were a handful of people she wished to deal with immediately.

"If Alistair and Astrid have a moment to join me, I'd like to meet with the following new recruits: Laurel, Tygon, Oliane, and Darius."

Two of them were Circle mages, two were refugees who

had been Blighted and saved by the Joining. None of them had particularly distinguished themselves in the battle for their courage or skill at arms, but they had other skills that could be put to good use elsewhere. For that matter the mages might improve with further training, which no one had the time to give them here at the forefront of the army, other than Morrigan force-feeding them shape-shifting.

Bronwyn was brief. "I'm sending you four to Jader. Warden Catriona is in charge there, and you're to help her. Petra's there too, and she can give Laurel and Tygon some training in battlemagic."

Tygon was embarrassed, but not as embarrassed as Laurel, who turned dark pink.

"I'm sorry. I've never been any good with elemental magic. I did my best."

"You did fine. You got your blood, and you healed some wounded, and you survived the Joining. Nonetheless, I want to keep some Wardens in reserve, and some supplemental training can only make you more effective. Oliane, I understand that you were a nobleman's housekeeper..."

"Assistant housekeeper, Your Majesty," the young elf said shyly.

"Call me Commander. Be that as it may, we have a big compound in Jader. Some of the servants remained, but not all. I would prefer to have Wardens who can be trusted with our secrets in responsible posts. We also have a castle in Ferelden that will require organization, when we can get back to it. I don't want to send you there alone, but eventually we want

Soldier's Peak to be our primary home. As to you Darius, I was told that you were an Imperial tax collector."

"I never actually asked people for money, Your — er — Commander," the small, slender man said. "I kept records. I maintained archives. I'm a scholar, not a fighter."

"Good. We need scholars and archivists, too. Soldier's Peak's library is in poor condition, though Warden Leliana did what she could with it. You might talk to her before you leave. I'm sending the four of you with the courier escort to the Port of Lydes, where you'll take ship for Jader. I'll have a letter for Catriona, and some letters for Denerim that Catriona needs to see get sent."

No one seemed about to break down in hysterics, which was a relief. You never knew about people. Bronwyn passed on the order to return to camp, and went to see to her horse. Others lingered. Alistair was impressed at the size the force they now commanded. He thought, all things considered, that morale was good.

Some indeed, seemed quite excited. A group of warriors had collected around Ostap and Bustrum, who appeared to be telling some sort of Avvar legend.

" — just as in the days of old. Animals go blindly to the sacrifice, the gods gave knowledge to men. When the Kings or Queens were dedicated, they knew their fate. In three years, or seven, or nine, whenever the custom was, the term would end and the gods would call them. Or sometimes they would

go when there was great sickness or a danger. And they went consenting, or they were no true rulers, and power would not fall on them to lead the people. When the people chose among the Royal Kin, that was the sign; that the true ruler would choose a short life with glory, and to walk with the gods, rather than live long, unknown, like the stall-fed ox."

One of the Orlesians looked tense and rather sad, glancing over at Bronwyn. "Are you saying — "

Bustrum went on. "Later the custom altered. Perhaps they had a King they could not spare, or war or plague had thinned the Kindred. Or perhaps a god showed them a hidden thing. They ceased to offer the King or Queen at a set time. They kept their ruler for the extreme sacrifice, to appease the gods in their great angers, when they had sent no rain, or the cattle died, or in a hard war. And it was no one's place to say, 'It is time to make the offering.' The King was nearest to the gods, because he had consented to his fate."

The ex-Templar Constant grimaced. "Andraste did not volunteer to be burned — "

The other Templar, Ronan, interrupted him. " — but she chose to lead the people against the magisters. She must have always known what might happen to her."

Alistair shook his head, shivering over the implications. He decided not to think about it.

Theology. Ugh.

Then he walked on, and so missed the rest of the conversation.

Loghain heard Captain Travis' report from start to finish, and considered it carefully. A servant brought him some hot cider and a bacon roll, and he had just enough time to swallow both before Prosper de Montfort burst on the scene.

"It's true?" he demanded. "There are Qunari by the River Orne?"

"So it would seem. The scouts only saw a dozen or so, though there may be more. All Qunari warriors, though they had an elf girl with them — some sort of servant or other."

Prosper's expression was quite the study. He stepped closer and dropped his voice for Loghain's ears only. "Qunari do not bring servants to war. If there is an elf with them, she is something very different, and very dangerous." He grew impatient at Loghain's hesitation. "Listen to me, King Loghain. You may know more of war than I, but I know a very great deal about the Qunari. I have made a study of them. I traveled to Par Vollen in my youth. I get regular reports of them. I speak their language. If they are here in the Orlesian heartland, it bodes no good."

"You distrust the Qunari," Loghain said, quite interested in this development. De Montfort spoke Qunari? That was quite the feat. Loghain had heard it was the most difficult language in Thedas, since it was not related to any of the others.

"Qunari are dangerous, and they dream always of coverting Thedas to the Qun. May I speak to this captain of yours? I would like him to describe the elf."

"Very well. Why not?" He told the guard. "Summon Captain Travis."

Travis came immediately, wiping his face, and looking like he longed for his cot and some sleep. Nonetheless, he answered Prosper's questions readily enough.

"Like I told His Majesty, my lord. The Qunari said their ship was wrecked and they rowed to the mouth of the Orne."

"You saw an elf among them, I understand?"

"Yes, my lord — just an elf girl. Young, passably pretty. The whole party looked a bit... beat down, but pretending not to be."

With forced patience, Prosper probed on. "Was the girl performing any camp chores? Cooking, cleaning?"

"No," the captain answered slowly. "Now that you mention it. She wasn't. She was standing by the leader when we rode up."

"Was she armed?"

"Yes. Yes she was. She wore a pair of daggers and she was dressed in green leather and a bit of mail — more like a scout than a camp girl." He frowned, retrieving the memory. "Sort of brown or reddish brown hair. She left the talking to the leader, but he turned and spoke to her. Big fellow, name of Karasten. Big horns on his head. On all the men's heads, too. Wouldn't have guessed they were the same as that Qunari who's in the Queen's retinue."

"Most of that race are horned," Prosper said, dismissing that remark. More interesting were other things in the report. "A Karasten! And you saw only a dozen with him?" He turned to Loghain. "Qunaris do not have proper names, but rather are designated by occupation or rank. A Karasten is a senior officer of the Qunari military. He

would have commanded a dreadnought."

"Travis said their camp was well-organized, but not well-supplied." He gave the captain a nod to fill Duke Prosper in.

"It's true, my lord. Based on what I saw, I believe the shipwreck story. They don't have much beyond their weapons, and they're living off the game they killed. And there are some wounded men among them. Some nasty burns, it looked like, though it was hard to tell."

"Did Karasten call the elf girl by name?"

"Yes... Tanis, Taris..."

"Tallis?"

"That's it, my lord. Tallis. She had a nice smile. I remember that. I didn't get close. This sounds ridiculous, I know, but I just had a bad feeling about them."

"You were wise, my friend. They would have killed you, if they'd had the chance. We need to talk at length with those Qunari, but we need to go in force."

Loghain was suspicious of all foreigners by nature and experience, and so he did not despise Prosper for being concerned about the Qunari. It had been clear to him, too, that there was more to the story than the Qunari had told Travis. Fortunately, the captain had had the presence of mind not to tell them all about the allied army. Let the Qunari be surprised by that, and see how they liked it.

"Yes," he said. "I want to meet this Karasten fellow myself."

The captain was dismissed, and Loghain raised a brow. "Tallis? You know this woman? A spy?"

"Worse. Much worse. She is a member of a the Ben-Hassrath, which is in a sense their priesthood and also their institution of political enforcement. They discipline those who have failed in their duty. They are also agents and assassins when necessary. I am puzzled that they would send a woman, for the Qunari separate the duties by gender very strictly. Generally, a female member of the Ben-Hassrath would punish women and children, but certain among them are chosen for their ability to blend in abroad. An elf woman would be a formidable agent. She is highly-placed, or I miss my guess."

"An elf woman is a Qunari?" Loghain asked, puzzled. "How can she be both an elf and a Qunari? She is in their pay, you mean? Like a bard?"

"No, I mean she is a Qunari. Put aside your image of elves as slaves or servants... or even as bards. She is playing no game. She is a highly-placed official of their government. She would scorn the idea of performing her duties for pay. Do not confuse the race of Kossith with the Qunari. The Qun is a philosophy, and open to all races. Most Qunari are indeed Kossith, but not all. If this elf is Ben-Hassrath, then she has embraced the Qun with the zealotry of the convert, and will thus be doubly dangerous. If they sent a Benn-Hassrath to Orlais, they had a specific, vitally important mission in mind. Her name... 'Tallis'... It means something like 'one who solves problems.'"

"A 'Fixer?' Well, you obviously know more about them

than I," Loghain granted, finding it both ominous and extremely interesting. Also rather amusing. It was pleasant to see an Orlesian worried about invaders in his own land. "Bronwyn has a Qunari among her companions, but I've never heard much more about him than that he's a good fighter. He served well down at Ostagar."

"Is he Qunari, or Tal'Vashoth?"

"I have no idea what you mean."

"Tal'Vashoth have renounced their allegiance to the Qun. What is the fellow's name?"

"Bronwyn and Alistair call him Sten."

Prosper de Montfort blew out a long, long breath. "He is a Qunari officer. I had noticed him, of course. I thought him a Tal'Vashoth mercenary — a renegade who has renounced the authority of the Qun, but it would seem not. Would you mind very much, if this Sten — which means 'lieutenant,' by the way, answered a few questions?"

"We can do that, though perhaps we should wait until Bronwyn is back. He's her man, after all."

Bronwyn was back fairly soon, though not soon enough for Prosper's anxiety. She was eager to hear about the patrols, though rather surprised by the questions about Sten.

"Yes, he's a soldier. He told me that he was sent on a mission by his Arishok to find out the answer to the question "What is the Blight?" I think he found out more than he planned."

"He was sent alone?"

Bronwyn was a little puzzled by Duke Prosper's intensity, but answered readily enough, leaving aside Sten's horrible crime. He was attempting to atone for it, after all.

"No. He had a small force with him, but he told me they were all killed by darkspawn. Sten was badly wounded, and woke up some time later in a cottage. No one seemed to know anything much about his men. He went rather berserk when he found he'd lost his sword somewhere in the Hinterlands, which I understand is a disgrace among his people."

"That is so," Prosper nodded in satisfaction. "A great disgrace. He could never return to them without it. They would execute him. So that is why he stayed with you?"

"Not at all. I found that sword at the Frostback Fair for him. Such a lucky chance. He was frightfully grateful and said I must be an ash... an ashkaari." She laughed. "That means someone who finds out secrets and truths. I think it also means some sort of teacher or philosopher, too. He told us a very amusing story relating to them."

"You found his sword," said Loghain. "So he was free to go. Why didn't he?"

Bronwyn shrugged. "I daresay he'd prefer to be able to report the whole story to his officer. He seems content in our company, though he did not want to be a Grey Warden, so I didn't force the matter." She studied both men in her turn. "Why so many questions about a lone Qunari?"

Loghain glanced over at Prosper, "Because, my dear girl, there seems to be more to it than that. He is no longer a lone

Qunari. The Greenway patrol came across a band of them, 'shipwrecked,' they said. Led by a high-ranking officer, and with some sort of government official with them."

"There is that," agreed Prosper, "and more. The Arishok who gave your Sten his orders is not simply an officer. The Arishok commands the Qunari army. With the Arigena and the Arigun, he is one of the three rulers of the Qunari people. Your Sten received his orders at the highest level. This is no mere idle questioning, but a serious reconnaissance by a foreign power."

"I daresay," Bronwyn said patiently. "Any Qunari could come to our country and find out as much. People are free to travel in Ferelden. Sten will no doubt have all sorts of things to report, but nothing I feel we need fear or be ashamed of. He is a brave soldier, and has shown remarkable personal loyalty to me, above all when I was badly wounded in the Deep Roads. I am not about to start treating Sten as an enemy. I think it's much more interesting to discover what these other high-ranking Qunari are doing here. Have they talked?"

"No," said Loghain. "I thought we might go have a word, and bring that Sten of yours along. Duke Prosper here understands their language, but there's no need to tell them that."

"All right," Bronwyn said. "Just as long as it's done in the proper spirit. I think well of Sten, and I would not want him to have any reason to question my honor."

She spoke very decidedly, and Loghain and Prosper exchanged another look, expressing the uselessness of

debating the dangers of such an individual so close to a crowned head. Prosper did not wish to quarrel with the Fereldans on such a matter, but vowed to have his own people watch this Sten very carefully.

As for Loghain, he resolved to deal with the matter in his own way and in his own time, and to be very careful that Bronwyn never knew anything about it.

Sten arrived, was somewhat bemused to hear of the arrival of the Qunari. He grew sober — even for him — at the news that a member of the Benn-Hessrath was of the party.

Bronwyn felt very much in the position of being Sten's advocate. She knew Loghain was suspicious of foreigners, but was surprised at Prosper's attitude. Then she reconsidered. Why shouldn't he be as xenophobic as Loghain, when it came to the arrival of armed foreigners on his home soil? Of course, a party of fifteen was not exactly a credible invasion force.

"Do you know why they might be in Orlais, Sten?" she asked.

The Qunari frowned massively in thought.

"A karasten? A member of the Benn-Hassrath? A mission of great importance, surely. Their rank is far higher than mine, and I would not be privy to their secrets."

"Orlais does not have regular diplomatic dealings with the Qunari," Prosper said, his face hard with suspicion. "Why now? Why come to Orlais when we are under attack? Might they be coming for the same reason as you? To learn more about the Blight?"

"It is... possible," Sten granted. Then, thinking more about

it, he added, "Or perhaps they have come for a thing of ours."

"What thing?" Loghain asked, pouncing.

"In the course of the formal cessation of hostilities between the lands of the *bas* and those of the Qun, certain agreements were made. Not all were kept," said Sten.

Neither Bronwyn nor Loghain missed the slight flaring of Prosper's nostrils at the word '*bas*.' They would have to get back to that later.

"You are speaking of the Llomerynn Accords, I presume," said Bronwyn. "What part of them was not kept?"

"Your Chantry had in its possession a Qunari artifact of great cultural value. During the peace talks, it was agreed that this artifact was to be returned to us. It has not been, thus far. It could be that if they knew this land was in turmoil, they would attempt to retrieve it, fearing for its safety."

Prosper smiled grimly. "The Tome of Koslun."

Sten inclined his head in assent. "It is so. A priceless book of wisdom, fundamental to the Qun. Your Chantry has had it in its possession for two hundred years. If the city of Val Royeaux has been occupied by the darkspawn creatures, the Tome could be in danger of destruction. It is the only thing in the whole of Orlais that the Qunari people would value."

"Good of you to tell us about it," Loghain remarked. Bronwyn glared at him.

Sten was unruffled. "It is no secret. We have requested the return of the Tome time and again. Your people have no use for it. It would be logical to return it."

"You know of this Tome, then, my lord," Bronwyn asked Prosper. "Do you know where it is? Was it on display at the Grand Cathedral?"

"I believe it to be in the Grand Cathedral, but not on display. No indeed. It was, to my understanding, locked away in the Cathedral vaults as a work of deepest heresy, but possibly valuable as a bargaining piece. As to why it has not already been returned, I think that was a matter of politics."

Loghain sneered. "Intricate politics, since the Accords were signed nearly a hundred fifty years ago!"

"No one in the Chantry wants the reputation of being complicit with heretics." Prosper spread his hands, and shrugged. "No one wished to go to the trouble of returning it. It would be a matter of some delicacy, since there would be those who would wish to possess it, besides the Qun."

"You speak of the Tevinters, of course," said Bronwyn.

Sten made a noise of disgust. Prosper nodded, smiling grimly.

"The Imperium would certainly like to have it, to study, looking for an edge in their ongoing war against the Qunari, and to strike a demoralizing blow against them."

"We're certainly no friends of Tevinter. Would you object to the Qunari having this book returned to them?" Loghain asked. "If it is locked in a vault, then it might well have survived the fall of the city."

"Indeed it might." Prosper actually laughed. "If the Qunari can pry it from the darkspawn's clutches, they can have it and welcome!"

Actually, the thought was very amusing, in a grim way. If the Qunari perished fighting the darkspawn, that would suit Prosper de Montfort very well indeed.

"We shall go to them tomorrow," Bronwyn said, "and you, Sten, will come with us. I'm sure you will have much to say to one another."

Sten nodded and went his way. Bronwyn turned to Prosper. "So?"

"I think he's telling the truth, as far as it goes. If I may venture to do so, do not trust too much in his loyalty. Do you know what the word 'bas' means? When he spoke of the 'lands of the 'bas?'"

"I'm sure you want to tell us," snorted Loghain.

"I do. It means 'thing,' implying 'pointless, *useless* thing.' That is the charming name the Qunari people use for anything not of the Qun. They truly despise us, you see, and consider nothing not of the Qun to have value. It's important to always bear that in mind when dealing with them."

The Qunari castaways had shown no inclination to come east, or in fact do anything but what they had come to do. If the allies wanted to know the truth of their mission, they would have to go to them and ask.

Ordinarily, the allied command would send the Qunari a summons to come to them, but it would likely be ignored, and either result in a fight or simply in them looking weak. It was better to go themselves with a large scouting party

to the Orne Bridge. It was a long day's journey, and they would have to camp nearby, but Bronwyn wanted to see the area for herself anyway. They would be moving the whole army west in a day or so.

Thus, she brought half of the Wardens, along with her loyal auxiliaries. Sten, of course, needed to be there anyway. He was showing no emotion about meeting those of his own kind, but Bronwyn thought he surely must be glad, after so many months among strangers, at the prospect of speaking his own language and seeing his fellow countrymen.

Signs of Blight were everywhere, and very likely spreading, as they did until purified with fire. There were signs of the darkspawn having traveled the road as well: the usual bloody trophies. These, too, were burned. They moved more slowly as they approached the site of the Qunari camp. Travis described it to the Dalish scouts, who moved in, silent and invisible. It was arranged that the Dalish Wardens would make contact first. Sten agreed that this was wise, as Qunari would not be so reflexively hostile at the appearance of elves. He also warned that the mages should be discreet, for many Qunari soldiers would be alarmed at the sight of an unleashed *saarebas*.

The Qunari camp was a neat but crude affair. They had lookouts, of course, but they were not that hard to spot, or difficult for the Dalish to evade. The Qunari were not so familiar with the plants, animals, and climates of the colder south, and their woodcraft was not quite equal to fading into the

alien environment. Contact was then made, when Danith slipped out from cover, Darach and Cathair at her back.

"Good day to you!" She called out, her hands out and in view. "I am the Grey Warden Danith. We heard that you were here, and I have come to see if you need help, and if you would tell me about any darkspawn you have seen."

There was an tense moment, when it hung in the balance whether or not the Qunari leader would order an attack, but the small elf woman at his side whispered in his ear, and the huge warrior relaxed. He nodded at his men, and they lowered their weapons.

"We require no assistance, elf. What we have seen is our own affair."

Danith was not particularly offended by his conduct. Sten was often this abrupt. He did not mean to be rude: it was the way of his people. On the other hand, Danith would not be surprised if this Qunari meant to be rude.

She gave him a slight smile. "I am properly addressed as 'Warden,' Karasten," she said, "for that is my function. Is that not the Qunari way?"

"It is," he answered.

"Very well. You do not have to speak to me, but I advise you to speak to my Commander, who is now arriving, along with King Loghain, Paragon Astrid, Keeper Merrill, and Duke Prosper, the other leaders of the allied army. They are not much interested in shipwrecked Qunari, but they are very interested in tracing the movements of the darkspawn."

"Your war means nothing to us," Karasten declared.

"I don't think that's true at all," Danith said, contradicting him to his face. "I don't think you would be here if it weren't for the Blight. However, our leaders will soon arrive, in command of a substantial force. They are inclined to treat you as guests in this land, which is very much to your advantage. Think on it."

Her eyes briefly met those of the elf woman at the Karasten's side, and then she turned away, and vanished into the trees.

Almost immediately, there was the sound of hoofbeats, and horses entered the clearing where the Qunari were encamped. Karasten knew his men outnumbered, but did not automatically grant them as outclassed. The warriors were humans, dwarves, and elves, after all; not Kossith, which were traditionally chosen as warriors for their superior size and strength.

But with them, on a large warhorse, was a Kossith. A hornless Kossith.

"Tal'Vashoth!" muttered one of the Karasten's men, and spat on the ground.

"I wonder..." murmured Tallis.

Loghain had told his companions not to dismount. They were not here to make friends, but to question potentially hostile interlopers. Prosper could not agree more. His part would be to listen very carefully. Sten was behind them, with a group of Wardens

Thus it was Bronwyn who first addressed the Qunari.



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"Greetings to you, Qunari travelers! I am Bronwyn, Queen and Warden-Commander of Ferelden. With me are King Loghain, and Duke Prosper de Montfort, speaking for the new Empress of Orlais. This is Paragon Astrid of Orzammar, also a Grey Warden, and Keeper Merrill of the Dalish. Also with us is Sten of the Beresaad, who has traveled with me for some time, seeking the answer to the question posed to him by the Arishok: *'What is the Blight?'*"

"Shanedan, Queen and Commander," said Karasten. "We see our brother has taken no harm, though he has been gone long."

"I have learned much," Sten replied. "I have fought the darkspawn both on the earth and under the earth. The Blight is a danger to all, and must be overcome."

"Knowing this," said Karasten, with dangerous calm, "you remain among the bas, and do not make your report?"

"It seems to me," said Sten, "that you already know how dangerous the darkspawn are. I see wounded men among you."

Loghain asked, "Where and when did you meet the darkspawn?"

Karasten gave him a blank stare. "I need answer no questions of yours."

"Really?" Loghain remarked, an edge in his voice. "Perhaps we'll have to see about that."

The elf, Tallis, spoke into the rising tension. "Why don't we all... calm down?"

Bronwyn smiled, "I am perfectly calm, Tallis. We are all



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perfectly happy to speak to a member of the Ben-Hassrath."

Tallis made the slightest movement of surprise.

Bronwyn's smile broadened. "I think we can be of considerable assistance to one another. We want to know what you've seen of the the darkspawn. That is a perfectly reasonable question. And I think you're seeking something yourself."

Tallis shrugged. "All right. Let's talk. Just you and me."

Much to the displeasure of her husband and everyone else who cared about her, Bronwyn dismounted and walked apart with Tallis, towering over the slender elf woman.

"I am not an Orlesian," Bronwyn said. "I don't play games. You came in a dreadnought, I believe, and you're looking for the Tome of Koslun."

Tallis' face was a civil blank. "Sten of the Beresaad's been talkative. Interesting."

"Not at all. We deduced it for ourselves. We brought him along in case we had language difficulties, and also because I consider him a friend, and I thought it would give him pleasure to see his own people once more. Perhaps I was wrong."

"He will be judged on his merits. Meanwhile, what are your intentions?"

"I intend to fight the Blight. If your party would like to join with us under our command, you would be welcome."

"Qunari do not submit to the commands of others."

"That is simply not true," Bronwyn said, clinging to the shreds of her patience. Tallis had a snippy manner of speech that irritated her. She looked tired, though, and perhaps

her hardships deserved some forbearance. "Sten has been a loyal soldier throughout our adventure. You are... what? A little over a dozen. You wish to find your Tome of Koslun. I have already spoken to Duke Prosper about it. If you can retrieve it, you are perfectly welcome to it. Nobody else cares about it. What I do care about is hearing about any contact you've had with the darkspawn. There have been no storms in the past several days. How did your ship happen to sink? Carelessness? Inefficiency? Did you — "

"The Archdemon sank it," Tallis interrupted her, stung by the implication of incompetence. "At least I think it was the Archdemon."

"Very large dragon... reddish purple in color... looks like it's rotting... white eyes? That Archdemon?"

"Sounds like it. Well. Yes. It was."

"Did it attack you at sea? In the open water? Where did this take place?"

"Er... in the harbor at Val Royeaux." Tallis shrugged. She saw no reason to keep this part of the story a secret.

"You sailed straight into the harbor of a city that had just been destroyed by the darkspawn?" Bronwyn gave her a look. "That was... reckless."

"Not all of it's destroyed. Bits are still standing. Here and there. Besides, we didn't *know* it had been destroyed by the darkspawn. That was the story you Grey Wardens were spreading. We thought it was worth checking out."

"I don't think I care for the way you phrased that. It is

the duty of the Grey Wardens to warn the people of the Blight. 'Spreading a story' suggests that we're spreading lies. The Archdemon, as you apparently noticed, is no lie."

"Fine. Whatever. We've only come to take back what is rightfully ours."

"And no one is challenging your claim. However, we do have to know what is going on in our theater of operations. So the Archdemon attacked you. How did it happen to notice you were in harbor? Did anyone make a landing? Enter the city?"

"I don't see how it benefits us to tell you anything."

Bronwyn took another look at the elf, and reined in her temper. "Then you're not thinking clearly. It benefits you because if you cooperate and do your part, you can walk away with your book. If you get in our way, we will have to consider you allies of the darkspawn, and therefore our enemies."

"Obviously we're not 'allies' of the darkspawn. That's ridiculous."

"Hardly ridiculous when you're hiding valuable information that might help shorten our war."

"Your war. Not ours. I think we're pretty safe on our islands."

Bronwyn understood her. Oh, yes. She entirely understood that the elf — this Ben-Hassrath — was taking the long view, and saw great advantage to the Qunari people the more damaged and wounded Ferelden and Orlais — all the nations of Thedas — were by the Blight. It was disgusting and opportunistic, but since the Qunari saw no value in any culture other than their own, it made a horrible kind of sense. For

that matter, it was not so different from the Orlesians sitting back, happy to see Ferelden ravaged. The unpleasant difference was that the Qunari was right. Very likely they were perfectly safe, with deep ocean beds between them and the continent. Nothing in the Shaperate maps indicated that the dwarves had ever attempted to dig under the ocean proper. If they couldn't do it, neither could the darkspawn.

"Keep your secrets," Bronwyn said finally, with a shrug. "Our army is coming along this road soon. Stay out of our way. You should know that darkspawn spread disease. If any of you fall sick, you can seek Healing among the Wardens. We have the greatest expertise in that." She turned and started walking away.

"That's it?" Tallis asked, surprised. "You really don't care about what I've seen?"

"I don't play games," Bronwyn said, and kept on walking. "If you want to help fight darkspawn, come see me. Otherwise, you can rot here in this swamp for all I care."

She swung onto her horse, and gave Loghain an expressive look.

"Let's go."

"A moment!" growled Karasten. "Go and good riddance, but Sten remains. It is time for him to return to his duty."

Sten clearly had been expecting this. "The Arishok's orders supercede all others."

"The Arishok did not order you to consort with *bas*," said Karasten. "You can complete your mission among your own

people. I speak for the Arishok in this."

"And I speak for the Qun," Tallis said. "Choose your path, Sten. You can be of the Qun... or not."

A pause.

"I am of the Qun."

With a deep breath, Sten dismounted. His hand touched Trampler's withers lightly.

"*Panahedan.*"

"The horse would be useful," grunted a Qunari.

"It is not mine," replied Sten. He turned to Bronwyn. "It seems that our paths part here, Warden."

"Not forever, I hope," said Bronwyn, disappointed and grieved, but trying not to show it. "My thanks for your good company. You and your sword will always be welcome." She caught his eye, willing him to understand how much she meant it.

"Let us go," Prosper sneered. "It is clear that these oxmen know nothing of value."

Bronwyn glared at him in surprise, wondering why he was being so deliberately provocative. The Qunari bristled, and conversed briskly in their own language. Prosper fumbled with his bridle, delaying their departure, and then they rode off.

Loghain, rather amused, turned in his saddle to question Prosper. "What was that little puppetshow about back there?"

Prosper was smirking at Bronwyn. "Did the Ben-Hassarath tell you they had wounded the Archdemon?"

"No!" She would have laughed, had she not been so unhappy about Sten. "All I got was that the Archdemon

attacked their ship when they tried to sail into Val Royeaux."

"It appears that as the Archdemon flamed them, the gaatlok magazine – the place where they store their explosive black powder – was set afire and exploded. From what I could gather, the creature flew away screaming." He snorted. "Of course the dreadnought was entirely destroyed, and only a few survived in a lifeboat. Rather a pyrrhic victory."

"So what did the elf tell you?" Loghain asked Bronwyn.

"Not much in words. She did let slip that they were sunk in the harbor of Val Royeaux. She wouldn't tell me if they came ashore, but I believe they must have. That's probably what roused the Archdemon. She made clear that the Qunari High Command feels secure on its islands and has no problem with the rest of Thedas being destabilized by the darkspawn."

Loghain growled. Bronwyn smiled a bit sadly. "What was most interesting was what she did *not* say and possibly does not know. I think she must have gone into Val Royeaux herself. She's in the early stages of Blight disease. She can become a Warden, or die."

While the rest of the leadership began moving the army up to the Orne, Bronwyn took a party of Wardens across the river. They moved past the Qunari camp, which was well guarded. Bronwyn looked, but could see no sign of Sten.

Nobody was happy about Sten. Alistair was not happy at his choice, and others wondered why Bronwyn had not ordered him to stay with her.

"How could she?" Leliana asked those questioners, exasperated. "She had no authority over Sten. He was a volunteer. He chose to go back to his people – to an officer who did have authority. You mustn't blame Bronwyn, and it is not Sten's fault either!"

Nonetheless, they could not help wondering about him. Even Morrigan, who was more suspicious of Qunari the more she knew about them, was used to having him about. There was some concern that the Qunari might harm him.

Bronwyn did not think so. It would be madness to waste the abilities and experience of a valuable officer and warrior when they were already so few in number, and the Qunari claimed to abhor waste. That did not mean they would feel obligated to treat Sten *well*. There was little she could do about it until Tallis came to her as her condition worsened. Instead, Bronwyn focused on their exploration of the land beyond the river, as they approached the site of the Imperial Army's destruction.

There was yet more sign of the Taint. Trees drooped, blackened and dying. The underbrush was dry and crisped, with a nasty greyish-white scale on the leaves. The air was heavy with the smell of death and decay.

Now and then they were attacked by wild animals, Blighted and distorted. It was a madness, and a pitiful and dangerous thing. Most dangerous was a white-eyed she-bear. With a hollow roar, it rushed them, drooling mouth agape. After it was put down, the Dalish tracked it back to



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its lair where its dead cubs lay rotting.

Further up the road, they met darkspawn, and that is where events turned very unpleasant indeed.



COMMANDER KARASTEN



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CHAPTER 19



A DREADFUL LEADEN SKY

T THE SAME TIME THAT THE ARMY'S ADVANCE PARTY MADE CONTACT WITH THE DARKSPAWN, STEN WAS BEING DEBRIEFED BY

HIS SUPERIORS.

"I respectfully disagree," he said, in his self-possessed, deep rumble. "I do not believe that Par Vollen is, as you claim, safe from the Blight. From the darkspawn, perhaps. Nothing, however, prevents the Archdemon from flying across the Northern Passage and burning our cities and fields to ashes. Furthermore, we know that this creature can enthrall others. It could enthrall other, lesser dragons, to serve it."

"Dragons are largely extinct," Karasten objected.

"I have fought dragons myself," said Sten, his face stony, falling into his normal demeanor when dealing with Qunari superior officers. It was to be regretted, but he could not but feel that Bronwyn was a more satisfactory leader than the ones before him. "We killed a High Dragon in the Korcari Wilds. The Wardens' party repeatedly faced dragons: in the Brecilian Forest, in an underground cavern system under

Amaranthine, and in the Frostbacks, where one of the party was killed by another High Dragon. From the reports Bronwyn received from the Nevarran-Orlesian border, dragons have made a resurgence. A hostile dragon could well prove a threat. We must be prepared for all possibilities."

Karasten and Tallis exchanged a glance, remembering the disaster in the harbor. They had been completely unprepared for the dragon's devastating attack. In this, Sten was correct: they must immediately begin formulating effective strategies against such an enemy.

"Furthermore," Sten continued, "as I planned to report to the Arishok, there is strong evidence that our people have had contact with the darkspawn in the past: or at least the Kossith race has had such contact."

"Clarify," ordered Karasten, intrigued in spite of himself.

"Very well. The darkspawn are of various kinds: hurlocks, genlocks, sharlocks, and ogres. They are physically and functionally different to a remarkable degree. There appears to be little understanding of the reason for this, but I believe my explorations with the Warden-Commander have caused me to have new insight."

"Go on," said Tallis.

"In a portion of the Deep Roads called the Dead Trenches, we saw the Archdemon. We also discovered how darkspawn reproduce themselves. It was an ugly revelation. We learned that the creatures kidnap females of the races of Thedas and through violent and abusive means impregnate them. I will

not dwell on the method, but it enables the females to spawn hundreds, perhaps thousands of offspring. The nature of these offspring depends on the female's race: the Broodmother we discovered was originally a dwarf woman. She spawned genlocks. A human woman would spawn hurlocks, and an elf woman sharlocks, also called shrieks."

Revulsion twisted Tallis' mouth, remembering the squealing creatures pursuing her through the horrible streets of Val Royeaux. The idea that they might have wanted not to kill her, but to... No, she wasn't going to think about it. "You saw one of these things... one of these Broodmothers?"

"Saw it and gave it the mercy of death. It was immense and distorted, and its mind and memory were long since gone. It was, however, a formidable opponent, despite its inability to move from the spot."

"Formidable in what way?" Karasten asked, pressing for useful details. "And how did you destroy it?"

"It could spit poison that blinded. It also wielded powerful tentacles that could crush and rend. Its hands had developed sharp claws, which made close encounters hazardous. However, because of the massive layers of fat, the most vulnerable area is the head." He frowned and continued. "The Grey Wardens are anxious to reach Val Royeaux, the vanquished city, because they fear that a large number of women would have been captured and modified in this way, thus creating the danger of a huge increase to the darkspawn horde within the next month or so."

Karasten nodded, trying to picture such a creature. If the Grey Wardens found a nest of such creatures, they would have to kill them with sword and axe, or with arrows and magic. How much more efficient would be the use of gaatlok. Not that the Qunari would offer it to them. For that matter, they had only one small keg of their own.

"What is your argument for previous contact between the darkspawn and the Kossith?" he asked.

Sten replied, "In the existence of the creatures known as ogres."

This required some lengthy description. Neither Karasten nor Tallis liked to believe it, but Sten was quite positive that the heritage of the Kossith was apparent in the huge horned creatures.

"They are not numerous, which makes me think that there were not many Kossith Broodmothers. However, in my readings in the dwarven Shaperate – a most admirable and informative archive – I learned that the ogres were known in previous Blights, though not in the First. At some point, Kossith women were captured by the darkspawn. No other conclusion is logical."

Tallis took a deep breath, and revealed an obscure secret. "There's evidence to suggest that an early attempt at a southern settlement was made by Kossith during what the *bas* call the Towers Age. This was very far to the south, in what is now the Korcari Wilds of Ferelden. It's one of many reasons that the Salasari is interested in that land. The settlement was a failure for many reasons – including the harsh and inclement winters

that prevented regular communication. A rescue expedition discovered some evidence of a massacre, and no survivors. If this massacre was committed by the darkspawn, they might well have taken prisoners. Yes, your conclusion is logical."

She squared her shoulders, ignoring the general malaise that had plagued her since they had landed in this dismal swamp.

"But none of this is a good enough reason to involve ourselves in the Blight at this point. There's no advantage to the Qunari people in wasting our resources to protect the lands of the *bas*. If the Blight moves north, we might be forced to reconsider. For now we'll hold to our mission. We'll follow in the wake of the Wardens' army, using them as a cover to find our way to the Tome of Koslun."

As the army forged its way westward, the sky darkened. A heavy layer of grey cloud blotted out the sun, but it did not smell like rain. The air grew thick and oppressive.

The allies had little idea what they would encounter across the Orne. A party of scouts moved out ahead the the main body of the army, crossing the ancient stone bridge over the river, feeling their way along the Greenway, moving slowly and cautiously.

The scouts included Wardens: Danith, Cathair, Darach. They sensed the darkspawn almost immediately, and moreover sensed that there were a lot of them to the right – the northern side – of the mossy narrow road. They immediately sent a soldier back to warn Bronwyn about

what was ahead of them. The young man glanced back at them with wide and wild eyes, and took off running.

"Where are they?" whispered Cathair, moving carefully toward the trees. "I see nothing. I hear nothing."

Nothing indeed. The forest was unnaturally silent. Not even a bird call rose from the branches. The air itself was still, as if bespelled. Dying foliage drooped sadly around them, darkening the way ahead. Even the grass of the Greenway was dull and greying.

"They're here," murmured Danith, tilting her head toward a fallen branch just ahead, its black and Blighted leaves shredded. "I *smell* them."

Without further speech, they instinctively moved back to back, presenting a defensive triangle, bows at the ready. The other Dalish and the human soldiers in the party, alarmed, mimicked them, ready and watchful. Time stretched out beyond endurance. Everyone's breath grew shallow, as they tried to be quiet; quiet as mice, quiet as the grave.

"Atch-aaagghhh!"

Danith jumped at the young soldier's sneeze. He was bent almost double, unable to stop. Sneeze after sneeze rang out through the waiting woods.

At the third sneeze, the ground beneath them erupted.

Darkspawn burst out from under the dead moss and the rotting leaves. The earth heaved, and breathed out corruption as the creatures rose up and charged.

"Kill them!" shouted Danith. "Kill them all!"

The range was short: too short. She could only get off two arrows before the closest were on them. She dropped her bow behind her and unsheathed her daggers, skewering the first hurlock that lunged her way.

"I hope Bronwyn comes soon!" shouted Cathair. He gritted his teeth as he stabbed a darkspawn, and then shoved it aside, freeing his blade.

The melee was brutal. Darkspawn chuckled and squawked; humans and elves cursed. Now and then a shriek of mortal agony plucked at their senses, but no one could turn to look. Darach stumbled against Danith, and righted himself, grunting in pain. Darkspawn were falling, but men and elves were falling, too. Out of the underbrush beyond the trees, more darkspawn were emerging, waving their weapons, rushing at the advance scouts.

Danith hissed as a hurlock caught her blades with his own, forcing her back. While she struggled with him, a genlock came in low and slashed at her, slicing a shallow wound across her middle. Her armor spared her the worst, but she could feel the hot thread of torn flesh begin to sting. She had no idea how bad it was.

"Keep together and withdraw back down the road!" she yelled. More darkspawn were coming. If they tried to make a stand here, out in the open road, they would all die.

Another scream. Genlocks had grabbed a bloodied soldier and were having a grotesque tug-of-war over him. His comrades fought back, desperate to save him. One

managed to hew the arm off one of the attackers, and the contested prize's legs were dropped abruptly. With a squawk of triumph, the rival genlock tugged the soldier away from his friends and brought down its crude iron mace, smashing the man's head to bloody splinters.

Bows still twanged. A quartet of Dalish had scrambled into the trees and were shooting down into the darkspawn. Danith's heart lifted in pride at their resourcefulness. The darkspawn attacked the trees with swords and axes, but were brought down before they could manage more than a blow or two. It was an excellent diversion.

The advance party moved back, drawing together in a rude circle, backs to each other. A thrown handaxe struck Darach in the knee. He went down, and another darkspawn chopped at his already injured leg. He screamed and stabbed up, gutting the creature. Danith tried to help him up, but it was impossible for him to stand.

"Get inside the circle, then!" Danith ordered. Crawling painfully, Darach managed to make it to comparative safety, and then collapsed from shock and loss of blood.

Darkspawn gibbered and lunged, feinting and hacking. The circle shrank, contracting as more and more of them fell.

The earth trembled, the vibrations shivering up the warrior's boots. Thudding footsteps, gathering momentum. One of the Dalish in the trees gave a cry.

"Ogre! Mythal protect us!"

Danith glanced over her shoulder. Looming, massive, it

was pounding down on them around the next turn of the Greenway. Once it hit them, it would scatter their little band, and that was death. There was only one thing to be done.

The runner passed the message to a horseman, who came flying back up the column.

"Darkspawn ahead! A lot of them! They've attacked the scouts!" "Morrigan! I need a wyvern!" shouted Bronwyn, leaping down from her horse. She blew into her dragon horn, sounding an alarm. "Wardens! To me!"

The witch threw the gear she was carrying into a wagon, and dashed off to the side of the road for enough space to make the transformation. Instantly a wyvern appeared. Horses reared and screamed; men shouted and clutched at their reins. Bronwyn vaulted onto the creature's back, and clung to the neck ridges, while they took off, the wyvern's roars clearing their way.

To do her justice, Velanna was at their heels, desperate to help her friends among the Dalish scouts. Anders, Tara, and Niall followed. Zevran laughed as he dashed away with wyvern Tara. Alistair and Brosca managed to get up on a wyvern apiece. Adaia ran after them shouting, until Alistair reached a hand back for her and pulled her on behind him. Siofranni ran after them, trying to catch up.

"Wait! Wait!"

Astrid shouted, "Let's get a move on! Yes, that means you, you mages there! Shale, bring the golems!"

Danith shouted, "Hold fast! Keep them out!" and then slipped between two frightened soldiers. She ran toward the ogre. It was crouching, head down, preparing to charge. She slashed past darkspawn, as they groped for her, and then she gave a wave to the archers in the trees.

"Shoot the ogre!" she screamed above the noise of battle. "Bring it down! Bring it down!" Then she sprinted away, daggers held tight.

Some of the archers heard her, and directed their arrows at the ogre, trying to distract it from its deadly rush. It shook its massive, horned head, dislodging some of the arrows, and then pawed irritably at one that had penetrated its ear. It gave Danith just a few extra seconds. Another archer had the sense to target the darkspawn in her path.

She ran; and time slowed to a crawl. Ahead of her was the ogre, and between them were yammering darkspawn. One went down before she reached it, and she hurdled it. It slashed out feebly, dying, and she felt the blade brush her boots. A hurlock challenged her and she parried his sword with her dagger and ran on.

Above her was the sky, an immense bowl of dull lead. Briefly she wished for a glimpse of the sun and the blue of the heavens above the Brecilian Forest, but they were far away; so far that they were now part of the dim, dead, inaccessible past. The only thing in the world was the ogre, growing larger as she ran.

It was fully crouched now, in a moment of perfect stillness before the terror of its charge. Danith ran up it; a boot finding purchase on a huge knee, another on the edge of a breastplate. She flung both hands high, and brought down her daggers into the corded vessels of its neck with all the strength in her, screaming aloud.

Foul ichor spurted out, splashing her arms and face. The ogre bellowed in surprise, rose half-way, and faltered. Danith screamed again, and gave the daggers a hard twist.

The right dagger's blow would have killed it eventually, but the left did the work far faster. Danith pulled the daggers out, and a jet of the ichor pulsed from the right of the ogre's throat. Bewildered, outraged, it slapped Danith away with its left hand, while with its right it tried to stanch the ichor squirting from the wound.

The elf landed on a dead genlock, breaking her fall, but still bruising her on bits of rusty armor. She scrambled up, and it was then that she realized that there had been not one ogre, but two. The other had been hidden by the bulk of the one in front.

Unwounded and ready for a fight, the second trampled its dying fellow underfoot, and was on Danith in a moment.

She winced as she bounded up from the ground. Lesser darkspawn milled about, getting in the ogre's way, but it carelessly knocked them aside, lumbering toward the Grey Warden nearby. She ran to meet it, slowed by her injuries. With a leap, she was on it, daggers extended at the chest just above the breastplate. At that moment, the

ogre was distracted by an arrow, and shifted to the right.

One dagger struck true, buried deep, penetrating the top of the lung. The other only slashed the ogre's left bicep. Danith clung to the hilt of the dagger in the ogre's chest, hanging there precariously, trying to gain purchase with her feet. Mortally wounded and enraged, the ogre made a grab for her, and yanked her away. Her armor was no match for an ogre's grip, and her ribs cracked under the pressure. With a scream, she threw her remaining dagger in one cruel, glaring eye.

The monster bellowed, and dropped her. It fumbled for the dagger, feebly, as its brain shut down. A great, wet cough, and it spewed out a mouthful of ichor. It took a step forward, and stumbled, already falling. Danith tried to roll out of the way. She did not entirely succeed.

She shrieked in brief agony, and darkness took her.

Just as Morrigan neared the darkspawn, Bronwyn jumped down to engage them on foot. It had been all she could do to cling on this far. There was no way she could fight mounted without the gear to hold her in place. She dropped off and rolled, coming up and unsheathing her sword in one motion.

The charge of the wyverns smashed the darkspawn. Morrigan lashed her tail, sending them flying. She spat poison, and rent them with her claws. The rest of the wyverns followed up, not giving the the darkspawn time for an effective counterattack. Bronwyn rallied the scouts and they spread out, killing the darkspawn laid low by the wyverns. Alistair

had jumped off, as she had, and was hacking genlocks to bits. Brosca bounced away, with a gleeful yell, and pounced on the nearest genlock. Adaia, still sticking to Velanna's back like a burr, was chasing the last of them through the trees, tossing bombs in one direction, while Velanna spat venom in the other. Zevran had the knack of staying on a wyvern as well. He leaned to one side, sword extended, moving down darkspawn as they pursued them down the road.

Dalish archers rushed in behind them, their arrows finding their targets. Merrill's childlike voice rang out in bloodthirsty threats. The shallow burrows the darkspawn had used for the ambush were routed out and any creatures hiding was slaughtered.

"Bronwyn!" called one of the Dalish. "Darach needs a Healer!"

The elf was on the ground, not moving. Even at this distance, he looked bad.

"Stay with him! The mages are coming! Where's Danith!"

Another answered, "She fought the ogres, but she did not come back." He pointed, and Bronwyn took off at a run. One ogre was piled on the other. Huddled down within the bend of a massive knee was Danith.

"Over here!" Bronwyn shouted. "Anders! We need a Healer, not a wyvern!"

He had raged over the battlefield, and his blood was still up. Great golden eyes stared at Bronwyn, and she wondered for a moment if he was going to attack her. Then the wyvern shivered back into Anders, who staggered a little

as he ran toward her.

"Danith's down here!"

They clambered over the stinking ogres, trying to think of a way to extricate the elf. Bronwyn felt queasy at the thought of moving her. Danith was covered in blood; worse, her hip was oddly distorted.

"This is bad," Anders whispered to Bronwyn. "I don't know how much I can do. We mustn't try to lift her yet."

"Where's Tara? Where's Zevran?" Bronwyn asked, remembering their packets of Ashes.

"I don't know. Gone after the darkspawn." He met her eyes. If they were not back in the next few moments, it would be too late.

By this time the golems had arrived, and Bronwyn put them to work moving the ogres away instead. The corpses were hauled away, the limbs pushed aside to reveal Danith on the ground. Anders crouched down, working to stem the bleeding and heal the wounds. Anders pushed back a eyelid. Danith moaned softly and blinked at him.

"Hurts..."

"I'll take care of you. You're going to be all right." He hurriedly gathered his mana, spilling blue light, trying to repair countless ruptured blood vessels.

"No. I'm not. The Dread Wolf has me. Merrill..."

The little Keeper appeared, and knelt at her side. "I'm here, *lethallan*." She laid a hand on Danith's hair, stroking it back from her brow.

Wardens and Dalish crowded around, everyone want-

ing to help. Danith tried to wave them away, but she was too weak, and her hand dropped to the ground.

"No," she murmured, "No. I want to feel the sun on my face..."

"— *What did she say, lethallin?*"

The clouds parted just a little: just enough for a rim of silver to line the edges. A fugitive patch of sun spilled down, casting light on the aftermath of the battle. Danith smiled, and died.



All things considered, it counted as a victory. They had slaughtered over four hundred darkspawn and cleared a wide swath of road. These were good things.

They had also lost a Warden to death, and another had been severely injured. Tara slipped Anders some of her Ashes for Darach, feeling sick with guilt over Danith's fate. The Ashes made all the difference. Without them, Anders might have been able to save Darach's leg from amputation, but the elf would have been lame for life.

Zevran did not know how to feel about Tara's decision. Yes, one did what one could for a comrade. He *liked* Darach. However, people died in war. All people died eventually. They could not save the whole army. Decisions would have to be made: hard decisions. That said, he knew that had he been on the spot, he would have given his Ashes to Danith.

There had been other casualties, of course. The humans would be consigned to the pyre. As for the Dalish, they would be buried along with Danith in their traditional way. An area was cleansed with fire, and the Keepers' plan was

to mark the graves with stones, and when the area could be further cleansed, to bring in saplings to plant on each one.

Bronwyn looked on, rather glad of Loghain's stalwart presence beside her. Such were the fortunes of war. Her relationship with Danith had not started well, but Danith had proved herself since as a courageous and principled Warden and a champion of her people. Alistair stood with a group of human Wardens and friends: Leliana, Silas, Emrys, Aveline, and others, looking on with sober curiosity. Astrid, of course, was there, serious and tactful, comforting Danith's friends. Those who had journeyed with her were grieved: Niall, Quinn, and Maeve, and Nuala and Steren. Danith had come into her own in their adventures together.

"I don't like this," Quinn whispered to Maeve. "I mean, it's like the Dalish have taken her back. Danith was a *Warden!* That's what we should recognize!"

"Shhh!" Maeve hushed him. "Funerals are for the living. Bronwyn's one to respect people's home customs. No doubt the Dalish find our customs strange, too."

Since it was a Senior Warden, the other leaders had shown the courtesy to attend as well. The Fereldan nobles could maintain a serious demeanor. For that matter, nobles like Wulffe and Corbus knew Danith and respected her. The Orlesians were less comfortable at the situation. All of these pagan goings-on seemed improper and heretical; and the idea of putting the dead bodies in the earth to rot and be eaten by crawling things turned their stomachs. Far better

a clean, decent pyre. The dwarves, of course, thought burial the appropriate way to dispose of the dead. The Dalish whispered among themselves, some not pleased that strangers were here to witness what was a Dalish ceremony, but tolerating it for the sake of the alliance.

Velanna had been weeping: hot, angry tears. Her face was swollen and red, and she glared resentfully at the humans. Nuala and Steren whispered gently to her, restraining her temper. Niall had slipped a calming potion into her wine, Bronwyn understood.

Keeper Merrill was quite distraught, too. Danith was from her own clan, and they had known each other from childhood. Lanaya supported her on one side, and old Maynriel on the other. A Dalish woman that Bronwyn did not know sang a dirge, accompanied by curious harps that were as much bow as musical instrument, and by a strange bone flute.

*"Melava inan enansal
Ir su araval tu elvaral
U na emma ableas
In elgar sa vir mana
In tu seetheneran din'
Emma na..."*

The words had a significance that was only known to the leadership among the elves. There were nods and significant glances. Beyond these dark days of Blight, there was a future for the elves that no darkspawn could sully and no human lord control. Merrill pulled herself

together sufficiently to say the Dalish words of farewell to the dead. The language, incomprehensible to all but the Dalish, sounded sweet and musical, its very intonation soothing the heart. Bronwyn sighed as Danith's body was put in the grave by Thanovir and Cathair. The elf girl looked very small and frail there in the dark ground.

"If we were not in the Blighted lands, we would give her flowers in summer and fragrant evergreen in winter," murmured Lanaya to Bronwyn, "But there is nothing here but Taint. Therefore we give her presents instead, sweet cakes and small bowls of hallenensal. Cathair carved Danith a little halla to keep her company. Velanna gave her a silver brooch she found in the Deep Roads."

After the gifts were arranged around the dead, a little bronze trowel of dirt was presented to Merrill. She used it to sprinkle a little earth into the graves. She gave it next to Lanaya, who then, politely gave it to Bronwyn. There was a little stir among the Dalish, but the consensus was that it was permissible for Danith's commander to take part in the ritual. When she was done, Maynriel gave her a little nod and took it from her. The trowel was filled again and again, and friends participated in the

The graves were filled. Bronwyn tried not to flinch as the shovelful of earth covered Danith's still white face. If she could bear seeing her friends consumed by fire, she could bear this.

When the graves were filled, the stones were arranged on top, and Lanaya chanted a long invocation in Dalish,

and the Dalish chimed in the responses. There was more restlessness among the Andrasteans at this. Bronwyn glanced around, willing people to have the decency to let the dead be buried in their own fashion. The last words spoken were luckily in Dalish, for they would have been inflammatory if declaimed in the Common Tongue:

"We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path. We are the last elvhen. Never again shall we submit."

When it was over, they dispersed to their new camp, and Bronwyn called a meeting of the Wardens. Cathair was the new Dalish Senior Warden. No one talked much, until the human and dwarven Wardens had turned in for the night. Darach was still in a deep healing sleep. The rest of elves had plenty to say among each other.

"At least Danith saw the elven land. At least she had that," sighed Siofranni. Adaia held her close.

"She died a true hero," declared Cathair, "and would want us to finish what we have begun. The Blight must be conquered before we depart from Thedas."

"And I'm not going until I free as many people as I can from the Tevinters," Adaia said, black eyes fierce.

"There is that," Tara said, trying to think clearly. She laid her head on Zevran's shoulder, feeling more guilty than she could express. "I would love to see my family. Just once, I'd love to be able to see them and speak to them. That Fenris probably knows heaps about Tevinter and what they do with the slaves. Let's pick his brain when he gets

back. Do we have anything to drink?"

All the elves stared at her. Wardens always had something to drink.

"My friend Oghren is snoring," said Zevran. "I shall steal something from him."

Bronwyn lay awake for a long time, listening to the sounds of the camp settling down, and to the insistent whispers of the elves, talking among themselves. They were too quiet to be intelligible. Bronwyn hoped they were not plotting mutiny. Loghain's breathing evened out, and soon he too added to the chorus of snores. His were certainly not the worst. She stared up at the dark red of the tent, backlit by a hundred campfires, and tried to make herself relax. She counted backwards, and only reached eighty-three before she was asleep.

She found herself in the Fade, surprised at how noisy it was. She drew a Fade version of the Keening Blade to ward off the creatures lurking in ambush. It appeared that she was in the ruins of a city, on an upper level of some great edifice. She peered over the edge of a broken floor, once glorious black marble. Far below her was a pit of nightmares.

Tentacles swayed like seaweed in the ocean shallows. A low, deep moaning rose up from it from a hundred ruined voices. Bronwyn thought they were cries of agony, until she realized that they were singing, heads raised to drink in the sight above them.

The Archdemon perched watchfully on a shattered tower, an immobile profile. Its fanged jaw was closed, and it physically uttered no sound, but from it rose a musical note, plangent, achingly sweet, and immensely powerful. It promised everything: balm for old wounds, surcease from sorrow. It promised, in fact, a perfect world.

Bronwyn looked past it, and far away saw a shadowy mass, hanging as if suspended in the heaven. She tried to make out details and thought she could recognize towers and gates, high walls and battlements. The Black City? it must be. Her mage friends had told that they could see the Black City when in the Fade.

She began climbing, up and up, wondering what would happen if she attacked the Archdemon here. Would it be easier to fight? If it killed her, would she be dead in the real world? Could she find her friends here in the Fade, and ask them to join with her? Mages could manipulate the Fade. Could she?

The Archdemon ignored her, more interested in what lay at a distance beyond them. Bronwyn kept climbing, and found herself atop a section of damaged wall. She followed the dragon's gaze, and stared, unbelieving, at what was stretched out on the plain below.

Blue and silver banners heralded the presence of Wardens. Thousands of Wardens. The Taint in the their blood called to her.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

"Bronwyn?"

Striding out of darkness, silver armor shining, was

Warden-Commander Duncan.

"Bronwyn! My dear child!"

He looked much as he had when they had first met at Castle Highever. White teeth gleamed in his dark face. With his gold earring and black beard he looked like a gentleman-pirate. He seemed very happy to see her.

"Bronwyn! You brave, brave girl! I knew you could do it. I knew you were The One."

"I haven't done it yet."

"But you have!" He swept out his arm, gesturing at the army of Wardens encamped below. "You've brought us all together, the way it was meant to be. Here, in the Dragon Age, Urthemiel will be vanquished and the Fifth Blight will end! You've done your part, and more." He gave her the kindest smile. "Now let your brothers and sisters do theirs."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"You've been the leader that Thedas needed in her darkest hour. There's no need for you die! Among your faithful Wardens are heroes enough. Or let a worthy brother of Nevarra – or Antiva – or even, yes, even of Orlais – reap the honor of slaying the Archdemon. Don't be greedy for greater glory, dear child. Leave some for others."

"We'll all do our best against the Archdemon," Bronwyn answered. "When we face it, no one can hold back out of misguided good manners."

She had once, after the slaughter of her family, quite depended on Duncan. Now his words seemed patroniz-

ing... condescending. Had he always been like this? She had come to disagree with his leadership of the Wardens, but she had never been uncomfortable in his presence before. No, that wasn't quite true. There was her Joining, when Duncan had killed Daveth with the Joining potion and then skewered poor foolish Jory. Those had been significantly uncomfortable moments. Even so, she didn't remember him seeming so... insufferable.

"Of course," Duncan intoned soothingly. "Of course. A Cousland always does her duty. And you've done splendidly. You deserve to reap the rewards of such superhuman effort. You're a queen, and a wife of a man who loves you— however unusually he manifests it – and you will someday be a mother. Think of the good you can do Ferelden – the good that I must say I think only you can do. If you were to fall, how long do think your scheme of mage clinics would last? What would become of your proteges, the elves? What would become of Loghain, unlooked-for love once again taken from him? And what of your unborn children?"

Three small phantoms flickered in the dreadful leaden sky, illuminated only by fire. A girl, a boy, a girl. The older girl had with long brown hair and pleading grey eyes. Bryce Cousland's eyes, starred with Loghain's dark lashes.

"Mother!" she called. "Mother! Save us! You've already lost our older brother! If you die, we won't even exist in the Fade!"

Bronwyn shuddered, and turned to Duncan's sympathetically smiling face. Duncan? She saw now that it was a bad

imitation. "That was a low blow, Urthemiel, even for you."

The smile altered only minutely. "Does it hurt? Good. You should know how it feels when your children are slaughtered. Mine wish only to live... to exist. They wish to love me, serve me, hear my song, reproduce their kind. You would deprive them of all those things. It is only right that you should suffer some grief in your turn. But see!"

The phantoms were brighter now. With a pang, Bronwyn saw that the boy had Loghain's scowl. The smaller girl was clutching a puppy.

"All you have to do is live, Mother!" the older girl sobbed. "Don't strike the final blow, and we can all be together with Father! Let someone else do it!"

Bronwyn hardened her heart, though it broke in doing it. "If you were really my daughter, and the daughter of Loghain Mac Tir, you would never have said those words."

They vanished, their sweet faces tear-streaked, fading young voices crying "Mother! Mother!"

The imitation Duncan's smile remained, but turned malicious and smug, the face lengthening, the eyes pale and cold. The immobile dragon on the heights had only been an illusion. Bronwyn turned to the real Archdemon, who leaned with casual ease against the battlements.

Bronwyn said, "If I weren't going to kill you before, I would kill you for that. You are too hateful to live. You were a rotten God when the foolish ancients worshiped you, and the Taint has not improved you. Your days are

numbered, and I will end you and the Blight together."

"Stupid girl!" the creature mocked. "I offer you love and a future, and you simper about the Blight. You are immune to the Taint! Use that advantage! Together, we can rule this world!"

Bronwyn hefted her sword, considering. It was not a great distance. Could she kill the Archdemon, right here and now, right here in the Fade?

"I'm not interested in ruling the world."

"Just some of it, eh?" gibed Urthemiel, the last vestiges of Duncan quite gone. "Just enough for your unfortunately limited abilities. But a crown, even of a wretched, barbarous, penurious land, is very sweet. Whatever happened to 'the kingdom within?' Your father must be so disappointed, not to mention poor Andraste..."

Bronwyn charged without warning, sword raised, running quick and silent. Just a step farther...

A burst of echoing laughter, and the Archdemon was gone. Bronwyn tottered at the edge of the battlement, and then she was falling, falling... the wind in her hair...

"Wake up, woman!" Loghain growled, giving Bronwyn a shake. "Stop arguing with the bloody Archdemon!"

Bronwyn jolted awake. The sensation of falling through space was so intense that she grabbed at Loghain's arm, gasping for breath.

"I tried to kill it!" she told him, her jaw stiff. "I tried to kill it in the Fade!"

"Good idea! See if you can pull it off the next time."

She sat up on the edge of the big camp bed, fumbling for a tunic. Her sword was propped up against the bed, which was reassuring.

"Where do you think you're going?" Loghain asked.

"Out. Out for a walk. It's almost day, anyway."

"It is not." He rose up on his elbow, and wrapped an arm around her. "It's hours until daylight. Lie down and rest, even if you can't sleep. Maybe I can think of something to relax you."

Riordan made sure everyone was ready to leave Montsimmard very, very early the next day: even so instructing Prince Florestan himself. He had warned them that those not ready would be left behind.

"We leave at dawn," he said, his tone brooking no contradiction.

Carver was pleased, as was the rest of his party. Jowan regretted that he had had no time to explore more of the Tower of Shadows, nor to insinuate his way into the Montsimmard Circle. Someone else would have to do that, he supposed. Nevin was uncomfortable, surrounded by Orlesians, and wanted to get back to the army.

Fenris was eager to return as well. There was where the danger and hardship were most likely to be, and that was why he was here, after all. Once they stepped beyond Verchiel, the army was entering *terra incognita*; the place where the Orlesian army had been destroyed. No one knew what they would find, other than lots of darkspawn.

'Where' was the big question.

Riordan had been glad to hear that Bronwyn had left a small garrison of Wardens at Jader, and decided to do the same here at Montsimmard. Out of his remaining Wardens, he left seven.

The Prince was ready in good time. So were his followers, and Berthold de Guesclin and his. The nobleman's wife and children were ensconced securely and quite comfortably in their townhouse. Altogether, a strong force of over a hundred would ride to the allied camp. Unsurprisingly, no one challenged them on their way. The only person they met on the roads was a daft merchant, Felix de Grosbois, who was hurrying south, bound for Val Firmin.

Other than the stops to rest and water the horses, they did not pause in their journey. They met elements of the allied army north on the Imperial Highway, at the crossroads with the Voie Verte. A rearguard was left at that point in the road, entrusted with patrolling the roads and keeping them clear.

"They've gone west on the Greenway already?" Carver asked, surprised. They were not giving the new Wardens much time to recover. On the other hand, perhaps there really wasn't much time to be wasted.

The officer of the patrol nodded. "Had a bit of a scuffle yesterday, too, I heard. Plenty of darkspawn over the river, I reckon."

A few hours on, and they began passing the main baggage train. Even Fenris had to respect the foresight of the ancient Tevinter engineers, who had built the Imperial Highway wide enough not to be easily clogged. One huge

wagon had them all stopping to gape. They heard the roars before they saw the occupant.

"Is that..." Riordan gasped. "Is that a wyvern? Is that one of the wyverns that was in the battle?"

"It's a wyvern, but it wasn't in the battle with us," Carver said, grinning. "That's Duke Prosper's pet, Leopold. Pretty impressive, isn't he?"

"Very. The others," Riordan persisted, "they were equally large?"

"Or larger."

"That's... very good news."

Prince Florestan sighed. He had always been rather afraid of Prosper de Montfort, and did not look forward to meeting him again. That Duke Prosper was in with the new Empress did not bode well for Florestan himself. Florestan's people did not bode well for Florestan himself. Florestan's people scowled, and Corot took to watching his prince narrowly, obviously wanting him to say something loud and denunciatory. Florestan refused to look at him. This was no time to fight among themselves. It was probably never a good time to fight with someone who kept a wyvern for a pet.

"It looks like reinforcements, my lord King," remarked Cauthrien. "From their colors, they are Wardens... and others. It's that de Guesclin fellow, come back, too."

Loghain recognized the Orlesian, and was briefly surprised that one of that lot would keep his word to return and fight. Probably wanted to be around to make trouble. And who were those others, with the painted shields

and the chased armor? He glanced over to see Proper de Montfort's face turn an interesting shade. Hiding a grim smile, he waited to see what developed.

Ah... there was Carver Hawke, looking pleased and excited, as if he'd done something brilliant. At least he'd rounded up more Wardens for Bronwyn. That could only be a good thing. The girl was in low spirits about the death of the Dalish Warden.

"Your Majesty!" called Carver. "We found Wardens at Montsimnard! This is Riordan..."

Bronwyn stepped out of the royal tent and her face lit up.

"Riordan! How wonderful to see you!"

The Senior Warden of Jader jumped down from his horse and strode forward to greet Bronwyn, with a fierce smile and a graceful bow.

"Your Majesty. It has been a long time since we last met."

"Too long. Present your friends to us, Riordan."

Some of Florestan's retinue stiffened at the idea of an Imperial Prince of the line of Kordilius Drakon being presented to a Cousland of Ferelden — and even worse, to a peasant like Loghain Mac Tir. It was for their Prince to have his inferiors presented to *him*. There was no help for it. For that matter, Florestan himself was not helping. He dismounted and came forward, a pleasant smile on his lips.

Riordan said, "Your Majesties, this is Florestan, Imperial Prince of Orlais."

Rather startled to see someone they thought long dead,

Bronwyn and Loghain stared at the bowing newcomer. Bronwyn managed a smile.

"Welcome, Your Imperial Highness."

Loghain added. "It appears that the rumors of your death were somewhat exaggerated."

"Very true, Your Majesty. *Madame la Reine*," Florestan said in a softer tone to Bronwyn. "I can see that exaggeration played no part in any report of you."

And then, to Loghain's great disgust, Florestan kissed Bronwyn's hand. Loghain was even more annoyed that Bronwyn gave the fellow a smile, especially since he was wearing a mask, which objects Loghain had made a point of banning from his presence.

"We're sorry not to get a better look at you," he commented.

"The mask? Alas, it is not an affectation, but to conceal what the darkspawn did to my face during my flight from Val Royeaux."

"Honorable scars are nothing to be ashamed of," Loghain growled. "Be damned to the world if they don't like them!"

Florestan hesitated, then sighed. "If it is your will, Majesty." He slipped off the mask, and braced himself for the reaction.

It was pretty bad, but everyone there had seen worse. The scars were still red. The Prince had clearly not had the advantage of magical healing when the wounds were fresh. The lid of one eye slanted down at the outside corner, and the nose was smashed like that of a drunken brawler. The flesh of the right cheek appeared to be largely carved away

and the skin healed badly. The flesh of the left cheek down to the jaw appeared... *melted*... as if by dragonfire or acid.

Impulsively, Bronwyn took him by the hand. "Loghain is right. It's nothing for you to be ashamed of, but it must have hurt horribly," she said, and then gestured to her own scar. "The darkspawn marked me too, as you see. I was very lucky to have a brilliant mage Healer with me at that very moment."

Florestan gave her an odd, sad smile. "You are too kind, Majesty. Ah, well... Let me make my comrades known to you: This is Philidore de Corot, a man of ready wit. This is my faithful friend and foster-brother Ursus, whose strong arm saved my life the night Val Royeaux fell..."

As the prince made the introductions, Prosper de Montfort arrived, a prodigiously false smile pasted on his lips.

"Your Imperial Highness."

"Duke Prosper. I was most impressed by your pet wyvern."

"Ah, yes. I think many have learned to be impressed by the creatures. We were all grieved at the false reports of your death. I shall inform the new empress of your survival, and naturally, also, of your acceptance of her as the rightful heir."

"*Mais oui*. I could not be happier for her. I haven't seen Celandine since we were children, but I remember how pretty she was."

Prosper sneered back, and let his eyes travel over the prince's maimed features in an unmistakable statement that Florestan's good looks were certainly a thing of the past. He said nothing of that aloud however, and only



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smugly remarked, "Her Imperial Majesty's beauty is greater than ever, were that possible. I act for her as her proxy and ambassador, especially as I am her affianced husband."

"You are fortunate." There was, perhaps, just the slightest emphasis on the "you." A careful listener might detect that Florestan thought the good fortune was entirely Prosper's.

Bronwyn took Riordan and the Wardens off for introductions and briefings. After their blooding the day before, they would all be glad of the extra swords.

Prosper held a public ceremony of homage to the Empress in the Orlesian camp. Corot raged inwardly, but Florestan did not object to declaring his loyalty to Empress Celandine in the person of her representative. Ursus was less upset. It was in the Maker's hands; and just as the Maker had allowed them to escape alive from the grasp of the Archdemon, so they would survive Duke Prosper's scheming.



Morrigan wondered if it was time yet. Soon, certainly. At some point she must confide in Anders, since the ritual demanded some degree of informed consent to be effective. Perhaps now was not a bad time. He was depressed over his failure to save the elf. His heart, already soft, would be softened further. Not that it was in any way his fault. He was a superbly gifted mage and a brilliant healer. The elf had been simply too damaged to live. That happened, in war. Morrigan had never cared a pin for Danith one way or another, and when there had been that period of ten-



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sion between Bronwyn and Danith, Morrigan had been completely on Bronwyn's side.

It was Anders' nature to be kind; to save those who could be saved; to relieve or prevent suffering. Very laudable, to be sure. That he was a Grey Warden, high in the Wardens' counsels and a favorite of the Queen's, was an excellent way for him to make the best possible use of his powers... with, of course, the greatest possible rewards. Rewards were agreeable things.

Morrigan had never thought of herself as poor in those days with Flemeth; never thought of herself as deprived. With the benefit of hindsight, she regarded her past life with disgust and indignation. She had lived in a dirty hut in a swamp, eating boiled lizard and entertaining stinking savages, while Flemeth told her what to think and do. She smirked, reflecting on the curious amulet in her special treasure chest: the amulet that would never, ever, in the course of her life be put to the use that she believed Flemeth intended. The world did not need a resurrected Flemeth. Now and then she considered having it thrown in the deepest part of the sea, but she dared not part with it, dared not let it out of her hands. If some fool were to throw it into the shallows, it could well wash to shore and into some other fool's hands. Perhaps, one day, she would take an ocean voyage herself. Or perhaps she would return to the Deep Roads, and throw the amulet into the lava, utterly destroying it, as the golem Caridin had destroyed himself. Perhaps that was the soundest scheme...

That was not the problem before her at the moment. The

problem was the ritual, by which she would gain control over the soul of an Old God, and would prevent Bronwyn... well, any Warden – but chiefly Bronwyn, whom she actually liked and cared about – from death by Archdemon.

It was an elegant solution. The Tainted seed of the Warden would attract the soul of the Archdemon. It would take up residence in the new embryo and be born once more into the world: pure, unTainted, sublimely powerful. It could well usher in a Golden Age for this cruel and violent world; and Morrigan would be mother to a god. As far as she could see, everyone – other than the vanquished darkspawn – would benefit. Bronwyn would survive, which Morrigan thought Ferelden's only hope for anything resembling enlightened government until Urthemiel was old enough to begin his reign. That would probably not be for many, many decades... very likely after Bronwyn herself was long gone and not inconvenienced by a supplanter. The little voice that might be her conscience – something she generally ignored and of which she denied the existence – pointed out that Bronwyn's children might not care to be swept aside. That was nonsense. Morrigan was not to be turned from her goals by any sense of duty to unborn children, even if they were Bronwyn's.

To be effective, the ritual demanded the child must be conceived "on the eve of battle," but the Archdemon could well attack at any time. They were clearly within the creature's attack radius, since they were approaching the

site of its destruction of the Orlesian Imperial army. The embryo, to be effective, must be so young as to have no brain function of its own.

Looking back, she felt that Flemeth's instructions had been pitifully inadequate. Why must she be alone? Why must the child's father have no part in the child's rearing? That part she had rejected already. Flemeth wanted her alone and isolated in order to kill her and take the child. Flemeth was no longer a concern, since one part of her was at the bottom of Morrigan's jewel box, and Bronwyn was wearing bits of her as very handsome armor. There was no reason for Morrigan not to please herself and remain with Anders as long as she liked, enjoying the hospitality of the Grey Wardens.

There were other concerns. The spirit of the Old God emitted a "song" profoundly attractive to darkspawn. Would the child also be a magnet for the creatures? How could she protect him if he was? Truth be told, the prospect of a safe haven built into the granite foundations of Soldier's Peak was looking more and more appealing. And the child, however great a genius, would need teachers. Anders' skills complemented her own so well... Tara was so clever and powerful and amusing... Niall was quite the expert in runes and glyphs: an estimable, ancient art... Petra was quiet, not a fool, and fond of children...

She sniffed, dismissing the idea of Velanna, whom she found obnoxious. Velanna could be assigned elsewhere,



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surely. Somewhere far away, perhaps.

Then Morrigan's thoughts turned to the most senior mage at Soldier's Peak, and even she briefly quailed at the sort of interest Avernus would take in the child. Would he discover Urthemiel's true origin? Would he want to do his part in mentoring a god? Yes and yes, unquestionably. Morrigan rearranged her future somewhat. Perhaps Bronwyn would want Anders at the Wardens' Compound in Denerim, serving as Court Mage. That might be more lively and equally secure.

Anders slipped into their tent quietly, looking tired and unhappy. Morrigan had left the lantern lit, and he saw that she was still awake.

"Darach will walk again, though not due to any healing of mine," he said, trying to smile. "That was all that bit of Ashes. Bronwyn came and sat with him for awhile, and they had a talk. He didn't know about Danith until he awakened, and he took it hard."

She arranged the bedding for him more invitingly, while he slipped out of his clothes.

"More will perish before the Blight is over," she said. "Without you, it would have been far, far worse."

He sighed as he lay down, and seemed pleased by her words. She supposed she should give him praise and compliments more often. They always worked very well.

"Yes," she continued, her voice thoughtful. "In this dark time, more will perish. That is why I want a child."



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CHAPTER 20



NO MAN'S LAND

WANT A CHILD.

To say that Anders was surprised at Morrigan's words was an understatement: he was amazed, astounded, nearly stupefied. Morrigan wanted a *child*? He had never seen that she had any particular fondness for children. In fact, she seemed to avoid them whenever possible. There were plenty of women in the army — in the Wardens, for that matter — who were fond of children and looked forward to a chance to coddle them or play with them. Morrigan was not one of them.

Of course, they always said that it was different with your own child. Morrigan might well be one of those women who had no interest in other women's children, but would do everything in the world for her own. It even made a certain kind of sense. Morrigan did not create relationships easily, but she could be quite loyal once she had. Witness their own happy... well... whatever it was.

But this was good, wasn't it? If she wanted to bear his child, it implied that she was not considering giving him

the boot anytime soon. A child? Anders rather liked the little buggers himself, though it was something he had never imagined in his own life. The Chantry frowned on mages marrying. It frowned on mages reproducing. For that matter, it frowned on people being *mages*.

And there were other issues.

He finally managed to squeak, "Maybe we should wait until after the Blight is over."

She remained perfectly in command, perfectly incisive. "And when will that be? Three years... ten years... a hundred? We might be long dead before the Archdemon is slain. Besides, there is another reason. I learned of this some years ago, but it seemed of academic interest. 'Tis not. We move closer to the Archdemon every day. I know of the sacrifice that must be made in order to kill it –"

"How?" he demanded, eyes wide. "Did Tara tell you? Morrigan," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, feeling very put out. "Morrigan, that's a Grey Warden secret!"

"I know many secrets," she murmured seductively. "I grew up with a woman who knew many more. Flemeth told me her all she knew about the Grey Wardens – and somehow she knew *everything*. She also told me of a loophole in the threat that hangs over all of you – Bronwyn especially."

He glanced about the dark little tent in panic. You never knew who might be listening on the other side of the canvas.

"We can't talk about this here. Tomorrow. When we're outside, we can make sure nobody's eavesdropping. What

I want to talk about now is you getting it into your head that you want to be a mother."

"The two things are related," Morrigan said softly, trying to be patient. "'Tis the begetting of the child that will weave a mighty protection over the Grey Warden who strikes the killing blow on the Archdemon."

Ander rolled to his side, trying to make out Morrigan's expression in the darkness. "I've never heard of any protection spell like that," he said.

"Few have. Flemeth was old and wise and knew many a thing unknown to other masters of lore. I used to dismiss some of her sayings," she said, by way of excuse for not telling him before. "but after further consideration, I think she might well have been right in this."

She turned toward him too, and laid a fair smooth hand on his side, stroking gently. "She told me that the unborn child of a Grey Warden could attract the spirit of the Archdemon away from the one who slew it. The Archdemon would perish, and the Grey Warden survive, and the child would carry the spirit of the Old God, now purified of the Taint."

He caught her wrist in his strong grasp. "Are you out of your mind?" he managed, trying to muffled the shout that rose up in response to this wild idea. "Since when do you trust Flemeth? Remember? Flemeth? The old witch who was planning to wear your body like a new gown? The child could well turn out to be a darkspawn!"

She should have given him a calming draught beforehand, but it was too late now. She made her soft tones calm and reasonable.

"The child could not possibly be a darkspawn. When has any child of a Grey Warden become a darkspawn? 'Tis irrational to suggest a thing. How could that be of advantage to Flemeth? And let me remind you, everything Flemeth desired would be something to her advantage."

"You admit she put this idea in your head. Why would it be to *your* advantage?"

"Because it would be a very great thing. An Old God would be born again into the world, free of the chains that bind the others; untouched by the Taint itself. It could well bring about a Golden Age. We would be its parents: we would cherish it and teach it. There is so much wrong in this world. Would it not take the power of a God to put it right?"

"Morrigan," Anders sighed, unable to believe what he was hearing. It was the craziest idea he had ever heard. And he had thought Morrigan was *clever*. "If I remember correctly, the Old Gods didn't do so well last time."

"So say the Chantry fools. In old Tevinter, mages ruled, under the wise and watchful eyes of their Old Gods. Magic was a part of life, like bread and wine. No one was burnt at the stake for causing a few sparks, or locked up for life because they could heal the sick. "

That was certainly true. Anything that would help mages was a good thing. But – "Bronwyn wouldn't like

being displaced by an Old God child."

She laughed softly. "And why would our child do that, when we have trained him from birth to respect the Queen? I daresay more than that, for that matter, since Bronwyn is likely to take a personal interest in our child. She would be a model and a teacher to the child, who would thus learn all about using power for noble ends. No, the child would be brought up to *help* Bronwyn. He might even rise to become a chief adviser."

"That's... true enough," Anders admitted, still uncomfortable with the concept. On the other hand, the idea of a child, fathered by him, born by Morrigan, was a very enticing one. Morrigan sensed his hesitation.

"You know how self-sacrificing Bronwyn is. It is an unfortunate trait, but so she is. She would never let someone strike the blow and perish, were she there to do it herself. If she does this without such protection, she will surely die, as all the rest of the Warden Champions have perished in the deed. What then will become of her new freedoms for mages, of her generosity to the elves? They will be dust on the wind, and you know it!"

Anders did know it. Loghain seemed inclined to let Bronwyn have her way, but Loghain was over fifty. He would not live forever. Another king or queen might be well-intentioned, but not have Bronwyn's fearless adherence to her beliefs, or... it had to be said... a certain degree of validation by the Prophet Andraste herself. Bronwyn

could get away with things that no one else could.

And of course, on a human level, he did not *want* her to die. He didn't want anyone to die. Morrigan must have been reading his thoughts.

"'Twas sad enough, the fate of that poor elf. If not Bronwyn, then someone else will perish. Will it be Tara, or that cheerful Brosca, or perhaps the noble Aeducan princess? Will it be you? Who is expendable?"

"Of course I don't think anybody's expendable!" He sighed. "I'm tired. I don't want to argue. Can we talk about this tomorrow? I've got to think it over."

"Very well. Think clearly, but not for long. The Archdemon is closer every day."

He had more questions the next morning. They took their bowls of porridge and withdrew to a fallen tree where they could sit and see who was close enough to hear them. Anders asked questions that Morrigan could answer, and some she had not even asked herself.

"What if someone else is up the duff?" he asked. "There are a lot of women in this man's army. What if Bronwyn gets pregnant again? Or Tara?"

"I am seeing to it that they do not," she said stiffly. "I distribute the women's tea every evening without fail."

"It's not that I doubt Flemeth's information... though I do," he went on. "There must have been other pregnant Wardens... or pregnant wives or mistresses. How does the

Archdemon's spirit choose which one to take?"

"I presume it would be a matter of proximity," said Morrigan, rather nonplussed. This was troubling. She had not thought about it, but surely there must be some parameters regarding distance from the dead Archdemon. "Clearly in the past, none of them were close enough to attract the Archdemon's spirit at the critical moment. But I assure you that it will not happen this time. I shall stand with you all. Furthermore, the ritual requires that you know and consent to it. Otherwise, it is simply another night of pleasure."

"Can't have too many of those," Anders agreed cheerfully. "There's another thing. You say the child would have the Archdemon's spirit. What does that mean, exactly. Will it have its memories? Its powers?"

"I assume so."

"Hmmm... Assumptions could get us into all sorts of trouble. Is spirit the same thing as intelligence? Is it the same thing as magical talent, or is that something physical? If the child simply has the spirit of Urthemiel, God of Beauty, maybe he'll have an overwhelming desire to be a royal dressmaker. Or an artist."

"You are being absurd. No god would engage in such trivialities."

"A lot of people don't find art trivial, sweetheart."

She huffed, dropping her spoon in the empty bowl with a clang, obviously dismissing his remark. Anders still thought this was a very dodgy business. All very nice to

have a child: not so nice to have a demon child out to rule the world. Why did Morrigan imagine she could control an Old God? Anders knew it would be entirely beyond him.

He liked the idea of an Old God's spirit living on — without its memories and power. That was fairly amusing, and tolerable in a God of Beauty. A God of Chaos like Zazikel or — he shuddered — of *Fire* like Toth would be utterly terrifying reincarnated as a toddler.

This child was clearly something Morrigan wanted fiercely, and denying it might well cause her to go elsewhere. That was an unacceptable outcome. He loved Morrigan — yes, he loved her — and he wanted a future with her.

"All right," he smiled. "You've convinced me. We're going to be parents."

Her smile made it all worthwhile.

"I must make some preparations. Tomorrow night, then."

Meanwhile, Anders' mind ticked over various scenarios and possible ways out. A baby was a wonderful thing. An Archdemon baby, not so wonderful. He would simply have to keep Morrigan far enough away from the Archdemon that the ritual failed.

Either that, or very early on he would have to turn his child's attention to the fine arts.

They were in the middle of a war, marching through Blight-infested lands. There was little time for training.

Nonetheless, most of the senior mages did what they

could. Huddled in covered supply wagons, Anders made sure that every newly-Joined mage could perform a basic healing spell. Tara taught them the basics of elemental magic. Niall taught them a glyph that would lock an attacker in place. Jowan went over the theory of entropy spells. Morrigan, reluctantly, and only with great persuasion, presented the basics of shape-shifting.

Velanna was not so generous with her time or free with her expertise, and would only teach other elves. Had she not been such a powerful and effective fighter, Bronwyn would have made something of it, but Bronwyn was too busy to deal with Velanna. At least she was teaching somebody *something*.

They reached the fork in the road, and decisions needed to be made. Even setting up camp had its hazards. Warden mages had to burn off a great deal of ground cover to clean a campsite. Water had to be boiled to purify it. The entire army was warned about touching obvious Taint and about the need to wash frequently. The Taint had affected the wildlife in the area, and they were attacked by Blight-mad wolves and grotesquely swollen spiders. It was not likely to be any better in the near future.

Riordan still wanted to punch through to Val Foret. A strong mounted party should be able to get there in less than a day. His last attempt had failed, but with the slaughter of hundreds of darkspawn, he now had a far better chance of success. Bronwyn was willing to detail some of her new mages to him. A few — especially the



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former apostates – actually knew how to ride.

Loghain liked the idea of scouting Val Foret.

"If the darkspawn already hold it," he said, "we'd be fools to march all the way to Val Royeaux with our left flank exposed. We'll send a party. If they meet significant resistance, they should withdraw quickly. If they can reach the city, all the better."

Bronwyn liked the idea, too, since the wounded needed a little more rest, and the new mages all the training they could get. Alistair surprised her by asking to go along with Riordan.

"It's my mother, you see," he told her, his voice lowered to a whisper. "Riordan sent her around the long way to see what was happening in Val Foret. She might be there now! If she is, I want to see her."

The party left the following morning, galloping fast along the Val Forest Road. Bronwyn wished them well, wondering what they would find.



Among other things, quite a few cases of Blight disease.

Pitiful remnants of the company that had called themselves the Imperial Guard were hiding out in the woods, survivors of the march of the Montsimmard Wardens on Val Royeaux. Riordan learned about what a disaster that had been. None of the soldiers could tell them anything about the Wardens. They were all either dead or still running, as far as the men knew.

"It was like the darkspawn always knew where they were," one grey-skinned archer told them. "The Wardens had...



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like a target on them. Wherever we went with them, the darkspawn followed. In the end, the last two went off on their own. We've been getting by as best we could since."

Riordan kept his face expressionless, not wanting to insult the men with his pity, and seeing no point in commenting on the foolishness of eating Blighted creatures.

"If you want to live, you can become Grey Wardens," he told them. "Otherwise the Taint will kill you."

A handful survived. The sleeping men – and one woman – were slung over horses and carried. The rest were burned, and the Wardens moved on. By the afternoon, they reached the limits of the Blight: a land where some green broke up the monotony of Blight grey, brown, and black. Beyond that, in another hour, lay the walls of Val Foret.

For a moment of horror, they thought it was under siege by the darkspawn. Then they realized that the small figures digging outside the walls were human, elves, and dwarves, attempting to divert the nearby river into a huge moat, encircling the city.

A great many people had already left Val Foret. The ones remaining rattled around the city as if it had suddenly grown too large for its population. To the great joy and relief of Alistair and Riordan, Fiona was there, with her largely intact party of a dozen Wardens. She had much to tell them.

"The lord of Val Foret, Count Alain Ghys-Demourne, is most cooperative. He was the uncle of the previous holder of the title, who is believed dead in Val Royeaux. He may

be old and fat, but he is no fool.”

The man was attempting to keep up some sort of normalcy, by encouraging those remaining in the city to keep trying to raise crops. The Wardens had already seen that the farms and villages to the north and east had been evacuated. They were not entirely deserted, however.

“The farmers go out and work the fields, while the guards on the towers keep a good watch. Some of us go out, too. If we sense darkspawn, the civilians will be sent back to the city at once. We are also patrolling the city very carefully.”

Riordan and Alistair learned a great deal. In the city were refugees from Val Royeaux, but unlike all the ones they had met and interviewed previously, these were not from the dock area. These were survivors from the western faubourgs and the neighboring villages, who had managed to flee upriver to the Imperial Highway. From them, the Wardens found out about how the capital had been undermined. The darkspawn had not breached the walls, but had simply tunneled underneath them, found their way into the sewer system, and emerged inside the city.

“Thus the patrol,” Fiona said grimly. “There is a survivor of the Val Royeaux Warden garrison here. The darkspawn did their digging just far enough from the Warden barracks that no one sensed them. By the time they did, it was too late.”

That was certainly alarming. Still, the darkspawn had not marched on Val Foret itself. Some scouts had tried to explore the Imperial Highway to the north. Most had not

returned, and the ones who did had not got very far.

Many of the inhabitants of Val Foret had fled west, into the Nahashin Marshes. Ghys-Demourne thought they were fools. When the Wardens were presented to him, he told them his opinion of the refugees very frankly.

“Far better to go south to Val Firmin. Warden Fiona here says that city is holding fast,” remarked the old nobleman. “There is nothing in the marshes but fever and starvation. I suppose they think to get to Andoral’s Reach or hide up in the Hunterhorns, but who’s to say that’s any better? Best of all to stay and defend one’s home.”

There was a certain consternation when the leaders of Val Foret heard about the leadership of the army that had come to fight the Blight. Nonetheless, Alistair, as a Fereldan Warden and a noble, was treated very civilly. He gave Fiona a little smile, and her heart swelled with pride at the sight of him. Yes, she and Maric had hoped for a simple life for him, but he was truly his father’s son, and had risen in life. Besides, if Bronwyn Cousland could be both Warden and Queen, then Maric’s son could be both a Warden and a noble of Ferelden. Alistair had asked Riordan to introduce him as the Bann of Stonehaven. “Arl of Jader” had not yet been approved by the Landsmeet, and Alistair thought putting himself forward as such would hardly be tactful in this situation. He was absolutely right. The Orlesians were thunderstruck that Fereldan soldiers were marching through the Heartlands of Orlais.

"Well... yes..." managed the old count. "Very noble of the young queen to bring her Wardens to help. Very proper. The rest of the Fereldans, though... are they taking over? Is that their scheme? I once fought against Loghain Mac Tir myself, and I don't mind telling you that I would prefer not to repeat that. He is... formidable."

"On my honor," Riordan assured them. "They are not here for conquest. Or," he said, honestly. "Not much. They have claimed Jader, it's true."

There was a burst of indignant talk. Fiona was surprised, but not angry. She had never felt the least personal loyalty to Orlais. Jader might well be better off under Fereldan rule. What would it mean for the Jader Wardens?

"However," said Riordan, holding up his hand for silence, "they have upheld the rights of the Empress' young heiress, Princess Celandine. Duke Prosper de Monfort is her general, and treated with perfect courtesy by the Fereldans. Prince Florestan survived the tragedy at Val Royeaux, and is also with them. And there is more to the army than merely Orlesians and Fereldans. Queen Bronwyn used the Grey Warden treaties to obtain a considerable army from the dwarven king. The Dalish, too, have come, and have fought bravely."

"Elves!" snorted a chevalier, dismissing them.

"They are superb scouts," Riordan rebuked him. "And many have died in the struggle. Some have joined the Wardens. All have served honorably, as have the mages brought from the Fereldan Circle, also according to the

ancient treaties. They have made a great difference," he added, giving Fiona a slight smile.

"Well, *mages*, yes," agreed Ghys-Demourne. "No one questions the value of mages in times like these. They whipped the Qunari in the Exalted Marches after all. The truth's the truth."

He liked to think of himself as a fair-minded man; and he was, for an Orlesian nobleman. He had mages in his household; their indentures bought at great expense from the Chantry. He had seen that they were always decently treated, and had been richly rewarded by their loyalty. He would have been dead the year before last from an infected jaw without the skills of his devoted Lyonelle. While what had happened to the Divine was a great tragedy, he was quite complacent about the destruction of the Circle's indenture records. Lyonelle and her children were safe now, which was a blessing in itself. He had not the least scruple about acknowledging the service of mages, even the elven mages who had the worth to become Grey Wardens. Warden Fiona was a credit to her race. Really, in his opinion, she was not like an elf at all.

Riordan considered, and then decided that they ought to know. "It is interesting that you have brought up the Qunari. The Queen came across a party of Qunari in the Orne Valley. They are curious about the Blight."

"How many?" was the next question.

"Perhaps a little over a dozen. Their ship was sunk by the Archdemon when they attempted to sail into the harbor of Val Royeaux."



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There was spiteful laughter at that, but the old count remained serious.

"Are they going to cause trouble?"

"Queen Bronwyn thinks they are here to retrieve a Qunari artifact – an ancient work of philosophy – from the ruins of the Cathedral. The Queen had a Qunari traveling with her previously who had served her well, but as he was a Qunari officer, he has chosen to rejoin his people. He, at least, understands the danger posed by the darkspawn, and the Queen believes he will restrain his people from outright obstructionism." He shrugged. "Loghain, on the other hand, is far more suspicious of their motives. He thinks it not unlikely that the Qunari are probing for weaknesses in the south of Thedas. As we have more important enemies to fight at the moment, however, they were permitted to live or die as they like."

Fiona said harshly. "Blight disease is likely to take them anyway."

"Very true."

Some of the Orlesians nodded at that, but no one was particularly smug. Everyone was too afraid of the Blight sickness gaining a hold in Val Foret itself.

They went down to the fortification works around the city. Riordan was impressed in spite of himself. Yes, darkspawn could tunnel under any moat, but the sides were built up so that the darkspawn would not see the moat until they were already falling into it. They would would



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be slowed, even stopped for some time. Later they would attempt mining under the city, but with the Wardens in residence, the Count could have his engineers countermine them and set fire to the works.

"I will not give up my city without a fight," the old man said. "I never thought I would rule here, but now that it has come to me, I will do my best for the people."

"That is all any of us can do," said Riordan.

They would stay the night, in the quarters assigned to the Wardens. Clearly, Fiona and Alistair wanted to speak to each other. Riordan smiled faintly, glad for his Wardens to have such a happiness, even in the teeth of Blight and darkspawn.



While Riordan was involved in the venture to Val Foret, the army was not idle. Numerous patrols probed the country ahead. For the longest-range mission, Loghain ordered a company to scout east to the mouth of the Orne, and see if they could make contact with the ships he had ordered to follow the army there.

"We can't lose them," Loghain told Bronwyn, in a moment alone. "We need to keep up communications with Jader and the rest of Ferelden. We can evacuate any wounded, of course, but we need the fleet whether we fail or succeed. Mostly especially if we succeed," he added rather sourly.

"I don't understand."

A bitter smile. "My dear girl, what do you think is going to happen once the Archdemon is gone and the Blight is

over? Yes, yes, I know," he said impatiently. "There will still be darkspawn to put down, but that will be a largely internal matter, surely. There will be no more Horde, no more attacks on cities. And with that, Bronwyn, your lovingly crafted Alliance will collapse."

She thought about it. Right now the Orlesians tolerated them because they had to. What if they did not? Her people were far from home, in enemy country. She sighed. Loghain was almost certainly right.

"You think we'll be in danger."

"I know we will. Oh, I think the dwarves will march back to Orzammar with us, but they may not want to get involved in a dispute between surfacers. I think we can more or less rely on the Dalish and the mages, because they will have no choice but to be on our side. They'll want to get out of this country as fast as they can, too."

"We have the Empress-elect in Jader."

"And that's all very well," he said, shrugging. "Though I think such a hostage will be of limited value. Prosper's claim to speak for her has been accepted. They know you would never countenance harm to the girl. She might spend years in Jader, a tragic prisoner, while Prosper rules in her name. Our value as hostages, on the other hand, would be incalculable."

Bronwyn shook her head. "They're not taking me prisoner."

"Nor will they take me," Loghain said. "Mind you, I won't leave the army to its fate. If it comes to it, I will be the

last man in the rear guard, but I'm marching out of here with them. It may get fairly grim. We'll want to put the wounded and the noncombatants on ships and get them away to safety. We must not lose contact with those ships. I'm sending Cauthrien. Put together a squad of Wardens to go with her to smell out the darkspawn."

Bronwyn considered sending Leliana, but then decided against it. Loghain did not entirely trust Leliana. Instead, she put Brosca in charge — a Warden whom Loghain did trust and even liked — and had her take Niall, Bustrum, Ostap, Nuala, Steren, and Sigrun. Any supplies they needed would be taken downriver by boat.

It would be easy enough to find the Waking Sea. All one had to do was walk along the northern bank of the Orne. Undoubtedly they would encounter darkspawn on the way.

First, they encountered the Qunari. Brosca had always got on perfectly well with Sten, and when she saw him, looming amidst some leafless trees, she gave him a wave.

"How are you?" she called. "We're going to have a look at the Sea!"

"I am well," he replied. "Perhaps I will be permitted to accompany you."

He was not.

Karasten and Tallis wished to give him orders, and the plan was to follow and observe only. Sten watched the Wardens pass, somewhat wistfully. It would not do, how-

ever, to give his superior officers less than his complete attention, however little he thought of them.

After a day with his own people, Sten's observations had somewhat alarmed him. This Karasten was accustomed to command at sea. He had great experience there, and was no doubt well skilled in all the maritime arts. On land he seemed uncertain, but was attempting to conceal it under a facade of severity.

Tallis was not uncertain by nature, but it had not taken Sten long to determine that she was unwell. Nor did it take him long to divine the nature of her ailment.

"You are ill," he remarked. "Too ill to follow the Wardens." "It's nothing."

Karasten frowned, watching her keenly. He narrowed his eyes at Sten, tacitly ordering him to continue.

"It is the Blight sickness," Sten informed them frankly. He told Tallis, "You have been exposed to darkspawn and have contracted Taint from them. I believe that the Warden-Commander warned you of this possibility."

Tallis tried not to show how alarmed she was.

"You've been exposed to the darkspawn for months. Did you get this sickness?"

"I did not," said Sten. "However, I have traveled with Healers who saw that every injury was cleaned and closed quickly, and was also warned by the Warden-Commander to take great care in washing. Darkspawn blood is particularly infectious. As you have seen in this land, both vegetation and wildlife are vulnerable to the Taint. The

Wardens deal with it by fire."

"Is it contagious?" Karasten demanded.

"It is infectious," Sten corrected carefully. "I do not believe that this sickness is easily transmitted by casual contact. However it will be necessary to exercise caution to keep the disease from spreading."

Tallis squared her thin shoulders, and asked, "What can I expect?"

Sten did not spare her the truth. "The disease varies in the individual. You will sicken, and either transform into a ghoul or die outright. No one recovers."

The Ben-Hassrath was visibly shaken at that. "She," said Tallis, referring to Bronwyn, "said that Grey Wardens could help me."

"I believe you would be required to join the Grey Wardens. I am not privy to their secrets, but there is a ceremony of some sort and oaths are sworn. At that point, you would be expected to pledge your loyalty to the Grey Warden order. Deserters are not tolerated. I did not join the Grey Wardens myself, seeing the conflict between serving them and serving the Qun."

Karasten frowned over that, thinking hard.

Tallis did not like the prospect at all. "My loyalty is to the Qun."

"Well said," Karasten approved, and drove his dagger through her back. The point emerged from her chest. Tallis looked at him with horrified astonishment. Karasten withdrew the dagger and a gout of blood spurted out.

The Ben-Hassrath collapsed, coughed, and died.

The other Qunari, who had been too far away to overhear the conversation, leaped to their feet in astonishment.

"The Ben-Hassrath had contracted a deadly contagion. She chose the Qun, and to die rather than to defect to the Grey Wardens, or to further infect us," Karasten declared solemnly. He turned to Sten. "I believe you were instructed to wash all Tainted blood from weapons and exposed skin?"

After a beat, Sten replied, "That is correct. Her body also should be burned, along with her personal possessions. Objects of metal can be cleansed by fire."

"See to it, and instruct the men in the appropriate hygiene," ordered Karasten. He retrieved his canteen, and began washing his hands with great care. Later, while the Ben-Hassrath burned, he would see to his dagger, and then wash his hands once more. Only then did the Qunari move on, following the Wardens and the rest of the *bas*, in order to discover their plans.

Val Chevin seemed safe enough for the moment. Hector Pentaghast left the city walls and went down to the mess hall, wiping his sweaty face.

For some reason, the Archdemon had not made another appearance. Plenty of darkspawn had attacked, but the Wardens were holding the city firmly against them. Attempts to tunnel under the city had been thwarted. In one case, the part of the tunnel outside the walls had been

flooded with oil and then set alight. Then it had been booby-trapped and filled with rubble. The darkspawn would have to try harder.

And supplies and reinforcements were still getting through. The harbor was untouched, and the ships came in and out.

Most of the civilians, aside from the brothelkeepers and their whores, were gone. Most had gone north to Montfort and Arlesans. Some had kept traveling. Val Chevin was now a city of Wardens, with a few chevaliers rounding out the complement, and some priests and Templars still in the Chantry. The Revered Mother herself had sailed to Cumberland, to wait out the war.

As in any city, it was a struggle to keep the peace. The First Warden ruled Val Chevin now, and had divided the city into districts: a Nevarran district, a Tevinter district, an Anderfels district, and now a Rivainni district. The Antivans and Marchers had decided to go south to Jader, apparently. Word had come that the Fereldans had pulled together a decent force, including dwarves and elves, and had marched west. The Antivans and Marchers would be throwing in their lot with them. That they were fighting the darkspawn on two fronts was wonderful news, and Pentaghast had sent one of his ships south, hoping to locate Queen Bronwyn and give her a message of support.

Did the Archdemon know about Bronwyn? Pentaghast hoped not. The Archdemon deserved the nastiest surprise

the Maker could craft for it.

Across the mess hall, one of his Senior Wardens caught his eye. Athis loaded a plate with hunter's stew, and headed his way. She looked grim: burning with suppressed anger. He had hoped her joint operation with the Tevinters had gone well. Apparently not. Pentaghast groaned. He had told the First Warden that nobody could work with the Tevinters. Nevarrans could get on with Marchers; they could get on with Andermen; they could even get on to some degree with the Orlesians – but the Tevinters, no. They were difficult to cope with even in the privacy of the Wardens' Council, when there were only dozen in the room and everyone was trying very hard. On the operational level, the Tevinters inevitably offended everyone. The handful of Templars left in Val Chevin did not help things, nor did the inevitable clashes between the priests of the rival Chantries.

Athis set down her plate with exaggerated care, and then slumped onto the bench beside him.

"Before you say anything," she began, "we did get all the way out to the Crossways. We didn't lose anybody, so I guess you can call it a success. I was feeling pretty good about it all, until we got back to town and the Tevinter staff came out to welcome their Wardens back." She stabbed angrily at her food with her spoon. "You know they brought slaves."

"Yes, I know." The Tevinters had been reasonably discreet about it, but they had come with quite a large train of campfollowers.

"And they're not just slaves. I think some of them are blood-thralls. They looked as blank as the Tranquil – but they were smiling. It was... horrible. Pretty girls and pretty young men, with terrible, imbecilic smiles pasted on their pretty faces."

Pentaghast was absolutely certain she was right. Tevinter Wardens demanded all the luxuries they enjoyed at home. He had heard that Tevinter Warden facilities boasted every pleasure: even brothels set aside entirely for the Wardens' use, staffed by mind-controlled slaves, who now and then became Tainted themselves. The Tevinter Warden-Commander refused to discuss the matter, and if they wanted him and his incredibly powerful and useful Warden mages to remain with them, there was nothing to do but hold their noses. Once the Blight was over, however, there was going to be real trouble.

"All the more reason to finish this. Don't spread this around, but the First Warden is considering marching on Val Royeaux in the next few days. We've got to locate any nests they've established before they start spawning."

The sentries alerted the camp to a large armed force approaching from the east. To Bronwyn's surprise and delight, they proved to be yet more Wardens.

"Enzo Visconti, Warden-Commander of Antiva, and at your service," said the tall man with the distinguished air and the lusciously seductive accent. Bronwyn noted some admiring looks among her Wardens, both male and



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female. Zevran was smirking, proud of his countryman for upholding the Antivan tradition of being irresistible.

Bronwyn wondered if she was reading too much into Visconti's behavior. He sounded just like Zevran, only older and more bass instead of tenor, and Zevran made a point of flamboyantly pretending to seduce everyone. Perhaps this was the way all male Antivans behaved. And he kissed her hand, of course. She was ridiculously pleased that her hair was in order and her face not speckled with darkspawn blood.

"You are most welcome, Warden-Commander," she replied warmly. "How many are with you?"

"I have two hundred thirty Wardens and a force of mages totaling forty-one." He laughed. "They are quite recovered from their voyage and glad to be on solid ground once more."

"You've come in good time," Loghain remarked. "We're moving into darkspawn territory."

"Ah, excellent! One wishes to arrive late enough to make an entrance, but not so late as to miss the party entirely."

Instead of fighting, of course, they had to have a meeting instead: Bronwyn and Loghain, Prosper and Florestan, Astrid and Merrill. First Enchanter Irving and Knight Commander Greagoir were included as well. Visconti tactfully inserted himself into their councils, trying to sense the unstated tensions and the strength of the alliances. They spent some time going over the map and pointing out what they knew and did not know. Their battles so far had been successful. Riordan of Orlais had gone scouting to Val



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Foret, and other Wardens had been sent down the mouth of the Orne to gather intelligence. Other scouts were out as well. Before their next big push, they would hear what the various parties had to say about the country ahead.

Visconti, in his turn, could tell them something about what he had seen marching up the Imperial Highway. Jader was calm, Halarmshiral holding, Lydes under control by its garrison. As to the Lord of Verchiel, Visconti smiled thinly. This was no place to bring up the fact that Visconti would like to beat the man bloody someday. Then they talked about the war itself. The Antivan was grim about the fate of the Wardens who had been in Val Royeaux and those from Montsimmard.

"So it appears unlikely that Warden-Commander Caron survived. That would make Riordan Acting-Commander. You think well of him?"

Loghain did not permit himself to snort. Bronwyn smiled. "I have worked with Riordan in the past, and yes, I think very well of him. He came to my assistance when I had the greatest need of it."

And while they met, a message arrived by fast courier. A Nevarran ship had arrived at the port of Lydes, and the Warden-Commander of Nevarra's letter was put in Bronwyn's hands. She excused herself while she read it on the spot. It was long, and a meal was served in the big tent while the rest waited for her to finish.

"Well, this is actually good news," she exclaimed, slap-



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ping the parchment down on the table. "Oh, is that mine?" she asked, seeing the serving before her.

In between bites, she told everyone the contents of the letter. She had not understood before now that the Wardens – all the Wardens – really had rallied against the Blight.

"The Nevarrans were first, but the Wardens from the Anderfels soon arrived. The First Warden himself! They're based in Val Chevin, the closest big city north of Val Royeaux. Pentaghost says it's pretty much a no-man's-land between the two cities now. He's holding Val Chevin fairly securely at the moment and they're being supplied by sea. And the Tevinters arrived next – "

She saw the expression on old Greagoir's face at the mention of the Tevinters, but chose to ignore it, and went on.

" – and now the Rivainnis, too. They were slowed down by a pirate attack, and their Commander has sworn revenge against the Felicisima Armada."

"Filthy pirates!" muttered Prosper. Pirates were a nuisance. Pirates cost you money.

"As to their tactical situation: the Archdemon took part in two attacks on the city, but was driven off by massed volleys. They haven't seen the creature since the eighteenth, which has them puzzled." Bronwyn laughed lightly. "I think I can shed some light on that. Some of you know that there is a small band of shipwrecked Qunari in the marshes not far from here. A Qunari dreadnought tried to sail into the harbor of Val Royeaux, bold as you please, to retrieve some



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artifact of theirs. They roused the Archdemon and a mob of darkspawn, which chased the landing party to the docks. The Archdemon then attacked the ship and set it afire."

A few chuckles. No one felt the least sympathy for the Qunari. Bronwyn smiled slightly and told them the best part.

"However, the Archdemon had a surprise of its own. You know the Qunari explosive powder? Their gaatlok? Apparently the fire ignited the place they stored it inside the ship. There was a huge explosion, and the Archdemon was injured in some way. At any rate, it flew away squealing, and did not linger to pick off the survivors in the water."

"Injured!" Visconti smiled, a fierce blaze of white teeth. "Good news!"

"Yes, it is good news," agreed Loghain, "since it has rendered it unwilling to pay us a visit... or harass our allies the Nevarrans in Val Chevin."

This was the first the Antivan had heard about an alliance between Ferelden and Navarra, and he paid close attention. This would be of importance long after the Blight was over.

"Unfortunately," said Bronwyn, "it did not render the creature unable to fly. In my own experience fighting dragons, and in the lore we gleaned from the Nevarrans, the most essential part of killing any dragon is to *bring it down*." In brief, she summarized things that had worked, and the role she wished mages to play. "Damaging the wings is what everyone who is not a Warden should con-

centrate on, first and foremost. Since we cannot surround it in the sky, we must fight it on solid ground."

She told them the rest of the message.

"They want to move on Val Royeaux as soon as possible, of course, before any newly-made Broodmothers can begin spawning. The nests will be tough, no doubt, but they are just as much a strategic objective as the Archdemon itself."

Visconti had considered the matter himself during his voyage. He had only a theoretical knowledge of Broodmothers himself, but his readings painted a dark picture. "Very tough. Have you had any ideas about how to destroy them?"

Astrid smirked. She had taken the lead with this. "A Broodmother nest is no problem for a well-prepared dwarven engineer. We've been using lyrium bombs in mining and construction for ages. They can be assembled out of a large number of lyrium grenades. We have people working on the problem. We can either use remote detonation, magical detonation, or, if we can get some distance above them, we can simply use contact detonation. It'll be a mess, and destroy the place they're hiding in, but lyrium bombs will do the job."

Greagoir opened his mouth, ready to bring up the Chantry's monopoly contract with the dwarves for all surface rights to lyrium. Then he shut it. Actually, dropping a large explosive device on the darkspawn sounded like a very good idea.

Loghain was deeply pleased with the message from the Nevarran Warden. Their diplomatic efforts had actually

paid off. They appeared to have one reliable friend, at least, in the Nevarran Warden-Commander. If a mob of Wardens were attacking the horde from the north, the danger to his own people and above all to Bronwyn was substantially lessened. It was late and insultingly Orlesian-centered, but at least the order was mobilized. To paraphrase the Antivan fellow, better late than never.

"We'll send a message back to Warden-Commander Pentaghost," Bronwyn decided. "We have messages anyway, and I wanted to send Pepin to Jader. We'll send a ship to Val Chevin as well, and tell him what we're up to."

There was a road of a sort running parallel to the River Orne on the north bank. "Of a sort" meant that it was narrow, overgrown, and underwater in places. Darkspawn stragglers were everywhere. The Fereldans moved along the path, and darkspawn jumped out at them from time to time. The Wardens sensed them well before their appearance, and most of them fell to Niall's spells and the archers in the party before they could engage them blade to blade.

Brosca liked action, but she could not say she liked this place. It was soft underfoot: as far from good honest Stone as possible, unless they actually tried to walk on water.

There were other hazards, too. Huge webs warned them of giant, blighted spiders. These were as big as the ones in the Deep Roads, and like them, were a by-product of the Taint. Many of Cauthrien's soldiers had not seen them

before, so there was something of a stir at their appearance.

At length, they came upon a large area that had been cleared by fire. Cauthrien raised her hand for a halt, and looked about her.

"This must have been the Orlesian camp. Come on."

She pulled out a pencil and parchment and began making notes and a map. Brosca led the Warden around the perimeter of the site, senses alert for darkspawn, but also looking for the odd bit of loot.

Not much remained. The survivors had remained on the site for some days, and had picked it clean. Large, burned-out places had evidently once been mass burial pyres. There was also evidence of a more recent campfire.

"The Qunari," Bustrum said. Steren agreed.

Brosca nodded. A smell of rot drew them to a body left a little way into the forest. It, too, was Qunari, from the size and the horns, though much of it had been scavenged.

"They just left him here?" Niall asked, disgusted. "They didn't burn him, or at least, bury him?"

"I don't think Qunari do that," Brosca said, trying to remember anything Sten had said about burial customs. From what she could gather, lifeless bodies were useless and no objects for sentiment. Still, surely the Qunari must dispose of them in some way.

"Sten told me," put in Sigrun, "that they believe in doing the simplest thing with the dead. If they live near the sea, they throw them in; if they live on a farm, they put them

in the field as fertilizer. They thought they would never come back here for their noses to be offended, so they just left this guy. Hey," she said, seeing Nuala's scandalized expression. "I didn't make up Qunari burial customs. It's not much different at home in Dust Town. Nobody does much with the Dusters until we stink too much, and then we're dumped in the lava pits."

"Lava pits are good," Brosca said, feeling sentimental. "Dignified and tidy. Really hard to loot the bodies afterward, though."

Meanwhile, Cauthrien and her subordinates studied all the burn marks, finding the long, raking scars of intense heat, discovering a deliberate pattern to them.

"Looks like the dragon burned a cross into the land," she remarked. "It came in one way, and then came in from the other side to maximize the damage."

People kept telling her that dragons were smart; that they had some degree of intelligence; that they were not simply dumb brutes. Cauthrien had fought against the concept as long as possible. Intelligent enemies were far more dangerous than the other kind. Still, this was proof positive that the Archdemon was capable of formulating a plan.

Bits of bone and scraps of tents remained, remainders of the fire. The survey of the site took quite a bit of time. The darkspawn had been through here later, leaving their typical trophies: rotting, flayed human heads on sticks to mark their passage. The ground had been trampled at

various times, but Cauthrien felt she was getting a good idea of what had happened here. The road led away north, and there, somewhere or other, the Montsimnard Wardens had met their doom.

"It won't happen to us," she declared. "All sentries are instructed to watch the skies as well. In fact, we've doubled our lookouts. If the Archdemon comes, we'll throw everything we have at it."

Eventually the river mouth opened out into many little streams, dividing the soft marsh into a maze of scrubby bushes and treacherous quicksand. Cauthrien kept her people strictly to the narrow road. The Waking Sea finally glittered amid the trees, and they came upon the Qunari lifeboat.

It was in fairly good condition. The Qunari had pulled it up above high tide level, and covered it with fallen branches. The wind had blown some aside. The oars were inside the boat. Whatever supplies had gone into the boat were now with the Qunari themselves, but the boat itself was quite usable.

"What are they planning to do?" Brosca snorted. "Row back to Qunari land?"

Sigrun dropped her voice to Sten's bass. "If necessary."

Surprised laughter greeted her imitation.

"Not bad," said Bustrum.

The village nearby was deserted. While the buildings showed some signs of Taint, the darkspawn had come and gone. They found no bodies, which suggested that the people living here had had the sense to run when they had

the chance. The lack of maintenance was obvious, but there were still docks and one very long pier extending into the Waking Sea. Beyond, in the untainted sunlight, five ships were anchored. They flew the Fereldan standard.

Yes, they were there, but out of earshot. Cauthrien ordered the company's standard bearer to walk out on the pier, waving the banner, hoping to attract attention. At length, there was some activity among the ships, and one of them launched a boat shoreward. At the helm was a handsome, dark-skinned woman with a great deal of gold on her. She gave them a wide grin and a wave as the boat drew near.

"Ahoy, Fereldans! I'm Captain Isabela, of the ship SIREN'S CALL!"

It did not take long to find out that they had mutual friends. Isabela's ship had carried Carver and Jowan on their trip to Nevarra. She knew Fenris, too.

"You can chat with the Captain after I'm done," Cauthrien said to Brosca, impatient with her gossiping.

They talked business then. Isabela told Cauthrien that they had received Loghain's message to come to the mouth of the river. The ships at the port of Lydes were now the merchant men who were ferrying refugees out of Orlais for whatever they could get.

"There's a lot of traffic in this part of the Waking Sea," Isabela said. "I saw some Rivainni ships put in at Cumberland not too long ago. Oh! And I saw what I'm sure was a Qunari dreadnought, but I have no idea what they were up to."

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Brosca was so excited to hear this, that she fidgeted, wanting to answer instead of Cauthrien. The tall bann gave her an amused look, and said, "The Qunari were looking for a relic of theirs in Val Royeaux. They roused the Archdemon, who destroyed their ship. The survivors are not far from here."

Isabela was wryly amused. "Remind me never to piss off the Archdemon."

Brosca's words bubbled out of her irresistibly. "You should watch out. The Qunari have a boat. I bet they wouldn't mind borrowing somebody's else's ship so they could go home."

"Thanks for the warning," said Isabela. "Now tell me more about this relic. Is it valuable?"

Cauthrien did not like this turn in the conversation. "To the Qunari, undoubtedly, but they're not likely to pay for it. It would seem to me that looting Val Royeaux will be a lot safer after the Archdemon is dead. Remain where you are, Captain, but do keep watch for darkspawn on shore, the Archdemon overhead... or Qunari in a rowboat."

Isabela smirked. "Problems do seem to come in threes."

At a safe distance, the Qunari watched the encounter. Karasten eyed the ships hungrily, longing for the sea, and whispered the scheme forming in his mind. The *bas* had found their rowboat, and thus it would be moved elsewhere, and hidden carefully. There were a number of useful ships standing off the coast. Any one of them could be put to use when the time came to return to Par Vollen.

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Sten listened to his superior's plans, forcing himself to hide his contempt. It was not necessary to murder a crew and steal a ship. All he had to do was *ask* Bronwyn, and she would arrange passage for him – and yes, his men. There was no need to sneak and spy. His opinion of Karasten sank lower. True, it was not entirely his commander's fault: he had never had dealings with anyone but Qunari, Sten had learned, and thus the commander did not understand that even those called *bas* were capable of courage and honor.

How long would Karasten survive against the darkspawn? It was a matter of some interest to Sten, for he was now convinced that the men under them would likely suffer the same fate as Tallis, if this Karasten remained in command. Sten had devised his own plan for finding a way to the Tome of Koslun: a plan not relying on foolish isolation, but which instead would unite Qunari with the great alliance against the darkspawn. Karasten, as far as Sten could see, was the only obstacle. The Qun was quite clear about how to deal with inadequate leaders.



CHAPTER 21

FIRES ON
THE PLAIN

AUTHRIEN AND BROSCA RETURNED TO CAMP WITH THE GOOD NEWS THAT A SQUADRON OF SHIPS WAS ANCHORED AT THE

MOUTH OF THE ORNE. Captain Isabela had got the message and was there for when they needed her. Cauthrien described the number and kind of darkspawn they had fought and her speculations on how many were in that part of the river delta. Then she described finding the old campsite and displayed her little map, annotated with her diagrams of how the Archdemon must have attacked.

"It was night," Bronwyn said, visualizing it. "It was dark, and no one was looking up. Of course, it would be hard to see the Archdemon if it weren't actually flaming."

"Dwarves and elves have better night vision," said Loghain. "The Dalish especially will be the best choice to watch the skies at night. They'll want to poison their arrows, too." He snorted a laugh. "And we'll tell them not to shoot until they actually have a chance at hitting the creature."

Bronwyn hoped they would not be treated to poisoned

arrows raining back down on their camp. "I wish I knew how badly hurt the Archdemon really is," she said. "We shouldn't waste the opportunity, if it's really damaged."

Loghain pretended to be philosophical about it. "The army can only move as fast as it can move." Actually, he was anxious to hurry, too. It had been a month since the attack on Val Royeaux. The Wardens all seemed to think it would take almost two months for the wretched Broodmothers to start bearing. They needed to strike hard before those unwelcome reinforcements came into play.

Brosca added, "I saw Sten, too. He wanted to come with us, but the bigshots said no."

"He was all right?" Bronwyn asked.

"He *looked* all right. I don't think he's pleased with how things are going."

"I would think not."

Cauthrien told them that the Wardens had done some work on cleansing the old camp, and that it should be usable if they traveled in that direction. She also reported finding the remnants of the Qunari: the dead body and the boat.

"And they moved the boat. It wasn't where we saw it on the way in. It crossed my mind to destroy it, but that seemed not only petty, but a perfect way to start a needless fight. The ships were warned to watch out for them, in case they decided to steal one."

"It's completely ridiculous," said Bronwyn. "If they had the least intelligence they would join with us for the dura-

tion, instead of standing on their dignity."

Loghain shrugged. "That's their decision. If they attack us or offer any hindrance, they'll have to be killed."

Bronwyn was not happy about it, but saw no way to object. Anyone who made it difficult to pursue the war against the darkspawn was by definition their enemy.

Riordan and Alistair were back later in the day, with the news that Val Foret was still holding, and that Riordan's wandering Wardens had reached the city alive.

"I told Fiona to stay there," Riordan reported. "We need an outpost there, watching for darkspawn. The refugees there were sure that the darkspawn tunneled under Val Royeaux's city walls. Fiona is making certain that they don't do that in Val Foret."

Loghain granted the value of Val Foret. It was directly on the Imperial Highway. As long as the city held, the darkspawn could not easily turn south. To the northwest were the vast Nahashin Marshes, and the horde would be as bogged down there as any human army. The Nevarrans and other Wardens were keeping the darkspawn occupied to the north. It was really not a bad tactical situation. If it had been any other army, he would think they had an excellent chance of hemming them in and destroying them piecemeal.

But they were not an ordinary human army. Darkspawn could survive without food and without clean water. They were hard to kill and they spread disease. And above all, there was the Archdemon, which could rain down death

from above. Ballistae and magic were all very well, but their range was limited. Of course, when he thought about it, it was true that the dragon's effective range was limited, too.

"How long is a dragon's flame?" he asked Bronwyn.

She could only give him a general estimate. Obviously, a High Dragon had a much longer range than the lesser kind, who could only flame the length of two men.

"Do dragons do anything else?" he wondered. "If they carried rocks into the sky, for example, and dropped them, they could do great harm."

"Yes, but I've never heard of that, or seen it, for that matter." Bronwyn thought about it. "I suppose there are all sorts of things an intelligent dragon could do, but they don't. They flame, and they use their claws, teeth, and tails to rend. They can fly in low and smash into you. I think they might well do that to an advancing army. But dropping things? It would be very effective, but they don't."

"Interesting." Loghain considered his options briefly. "We move out tomorrow."

Their next objective was the Charente River.

Val Charente lay on both sides the river, according to the map: a small town south of Val Royeaux. Nobody had heard a word from it, or from anyone claiming to be a refugee. A bridge spanned the river, and rather than going all the way up to Val Foret and traveling on the Imperial Highway, which crossed the Charente at the town of Arc, Loghain preferred to try the smaller bridge along the Gre-

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enway that would shorten their journey to Val Royeaux.

"The Count in Val Foret knows nothing of the fate of Arc," Riordan told them. "None of his scouts got that far. The darkspawn very likely hold the bridge there."

"Presumably they hold the bridge at Val Charente as well," Bronwyn pointed out.

"True," said Loghain, "but I like the idea of using the bridge at Val Charente better, anyway. We'll have naval support that way, and we can withdraw into the Orne Marshes and back up the Greenway if we get into trouble."

Bronwyn liked the idea better too. Ever since Loghain had confided his concerns about being trapped deep in Orlais, it had preyed on her mind. It caused her to look at Duke Prosper in a different light. He was a sound ally at the moment. He even seemed to personally like and respect her, but she could imagine, all too easily, that he would turn on them the moment he could do so with impunity.

They finished their meeting and Riordan and Alistair went off to be introduced to the Antivan Wardens. The noise from from the Wardens' camp was loud and cheerful, and their presence reassured Bronwyn somewhat. Without the Wardens, their position would be infinitely more perilous.

No sane person would cross the Wardens, and a large portion of them were under her command. In fact, they were all under her general command, by common consent. The mages and Dalish, as she and Loghain had agreed, were loyal because it was in their best interests to be loyal.

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Astrid and her dwarves – for they were now unmistakably Astrid's dwarves – would likely stand with them, as long as their escape did not take too long or cost too many lives.

What about the Antivan Wardens in particular? They were curious about her, having heard some sort of nonsensical stories about her and the Ashes and Andraste. They were very curious about the dogs, and were quick to see their value in combat. Visconti himself seemed friendly enough, but she could not imagine him wanting to get between the Fereldan army and the growing Orlesian forces.

For they were certainly growing. Prosper de Montfort had done very well, luring in nobles and chevaliers at loose ends since the fall of Val Royeaux. They, in turn, brought their retinues, and they were beginning to add up very nicely. Loghain always gave orders when they made camp, and organized things so there would be the least amount of tension, but it was difficult to field an army with such contradictory elements without the occasional conflict. The Fereldans were fairly well trained by now – unless they were drunk – and would not automatically assume any elven woman was theirs for the taking. Nor did they utter high, girly screams, at the sight of a mage using magic. Newcomers to the army, however, were not so collaborative. All that could be done was to keep the Dalish as far from the Orlesians as possible, and to make sure that no Orlesian patrol incorporated Dalish scouts who were not also Grey Wardens. The Orlesians did respect Grey Wardens, and understood that Grey Wardens came in

all races and both genders – and included mages as well.

"Perhaps we should send Corbus home," Bronwyn said, her voice low. "Perhaps we should send him downriver to that Captain Isabela, and get him out of here."

Loghain had been thinking exactly the same thing. "He won't thank us for it."

"No, but I'd rather he survived all this. We've had it easy so far, it's going to get so much worse. The farther we go, the more Taint everyone will be exposed to. It's inevitable that soldiers will contract Blight disease. We can try the Joining, but it won't work for everyone, and I certainly don't want to risk Corbus."

He nodded. "The Wardens will have to be in the vanguard as we march. Try to clear the way as much as possible. Try to burn off potential campsites. Have the mages test the water. We'll do what we can, but you're right: people will fall sick. It's too bad Duncan wasn't as honest about dealing with the Blight sickness."

Bronwyn gave him a tight smile. The dream of the Archdemon still haunted her, and she found it too disturbing to describe even to Loghain. No doubt he would find the idea of the Archdemon disguising itself as Duncan amusing. Bronwyn, however, was not amused. She still toyed with the idea of trying to kill the Archdemon in the Fade. If demons could be killed there, why not the Archdemon itself? The problem was that demons could also manipulate the Fade, and change things to suit themselves— just as the Archdemon had.

Arl Wulffe's hearty voice was heard outside the tent.

"Are they in? I'd like a word."

"Yes, we're here. Come on in, Wulffe," Loghain called.

Wulffe looked remarkably cheerful. "We have a new recruit. Who'd have thought the girl to have this much spirit?"

Bronwyn stared at him blankly. "Who —?"

"Charade! Rothgar's Charade! The girl rode all the way here from Denerim, looking for him." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Tired of waiting, I daresay, and wanting her wedding night. You should have seen the look on his face. Happy about it, after the surprise, of course. Be honored if you'd come to the wedding, which is going to be —" he burst out laughing — before supper, I suppose. The girl brought a promissory note for her dowry!"

"I suppose we can find a priest —"

Wulffe was still laughing. "Oh, that's taken care of, too! She found a young Mother in Verchiel willing to ride out with her. Mother... I forget... Mother Something-Orlesian-Sounding. At least she can sit a horse."

"Lady Charade came alone?" Loghain asked, rather impressed.

"With the couriers. Got an order from Anora for horses. Resourceful of her. At this point, I'd let Rothgar marry her, even if she weren't good for the five hundred sovereigns!"

The wedding was rather sweet. Everyone enjoyed it, and many waxed sentimental. Even the Orlesians, who barely knew Rothgar, and the Antivans, who did not know him at all, were moved to attend and support the couple. A chance for a celebration was always welcome, especially

in such dark times. Prince Florestan was particularly gallant to the bride, who had the decency to smile at him without flinching at his ruined face.

Charade had brought a pretty yellow silk dress in a saddlebag. Rothgar found a ring among the quartermaster's supplies: a fine ruby sold by one of the new Wardens for a fraction of its worth in order to buy drink instead. The quartermasters were cautious about loot sold by Wardens, and always had a mage on hand to clean the items properly. The ring even fit, and was much admired on Charade's strong and shapely hand.

Mother Donatienne looked rather dazed, or perhaps she was simply tired. The ride had been a hard one. The young noblewoman had offered a huge sum for a priest to accompany her, and though Donatienne grew frightened as they went west, she did not dare turn back alone. Strange as this rough camp of warriors was, it was better than the lonely road. She had been very frightened at first by the big Fereldan dogs, but was assured that they would never harm her.

And most people were very kind to her. A Templar, Sir Silas, approached her, and made her welcome. There were other Templars, too, led by a Knight-Commander, and a former lay sister, now a Warden.

"Yes, there are mages here," Leliana told her, in a sweet and soothing voice. "They are nothing to be afraid of. They are being very brave, and trying to do their duty by fighting the horrible darkspawn. The Dalish elves, too, are

our allies. It is sad that they do not know the Maker, but all we can do is lead by example."

Donatienne was no fool, and understood the implicit message: *"Don't cause trouble."*

That seemed like good advice. Naturally, things were always chaotic in war – or at least that was what she had always heard. Fortunately, the Chantry would be there to help return things to normal once this dreadful Blight was over. Somewhere, perhaps the Divine was still alive; or a new Divine would be elected. A new Cathedral would rise, and the mages would be returned to the safety of their Circles.

And the wedding was a proper opportunity to convey the Maker's message. Donatienne set about making it as pleasant and memorable an experience as she could. Leliana and Aeron had their instruments, and played softly, while the priest recited the Chant of Light, and the couple exchanged vows. They were declared husband and wife, and crowd cheered.

"You're not angry?" Charade whispered to Rothgar, under all the noise.

"Angry? No! I can't believe you're here!" He laughed. "And I can't believe all the presents we're getting!"

There was something to be said for having a wedding in front of an army that had a great deal of loot. Anders and Tara stood guard by a huge cauldron, which was rapidly filling up with coin and jewels and oddments, making sure nothing was Tainted.

Bronwyn actually wore a gown for the occasion, and

made an effort to look her best. As the chief guests, she and Loghain looked on benignly, while their thoughts remained on the campaign ahead.

"We need to send her back as soon as possible," Bronwyn murmured, her smile fixed, feeling rather sorry for the brave young woman who seemed so very, very happy.

"Obviously." Loghain did not smile, but no one expected him to anyway. "We can't delay the advance for anyone's honeymoon. On the other hand, Rothgar can see her to that pirate woman's ship."

"Privateer."

"It amounts to the same thing."

"We'll order Corbus to go too, and tell him to look after her on the way home."



The following celebration was restrained. They were marching out in the morning, and no one — or almost no one — wanted a heavy head. They had the dispatches, but Charade could give them the gossip from Denerim in her own words. They learned that Bethany Hawke had established a free clinic in the Market District, under the protection of the Chantry. They also heard about the return of the Tenvinters, and the death of Arl Kane. Bronwyn groaned, feeling like pounding her head on the table. Would Denerim ever be sorted out?

Loghain leaned over, and told her his private opinion. "Maybe we should dispense with the Arls of Denerim altogether. Charter the city and have the guilds elect a mayor.

Keep everything under the general authority of the Crown."

It was a shockingly radical idea, and Bronwyn could not quite see how a city could be governed without a proper lord. However, it was quite impossible that lords like Urien, Vaughan, or Kane could be considered competent. Perhaps Denerim really would be better off without them.

"It would be hard on Faline," she whispered back, "to be done out of her rights."

"Why should a twelve-year-old girl who grew up on a farm have any right to rule Denerim?" Loghain growled back. Bronwyn was nonplussed by his attitude. The sturdy, independent freeholder appeared in him at the oddest times. Wulffe was speaking to her, and she turned to him with a smile, dismissing Loghain's revolutionary ideas from her mind.

There were toasts, of course, but soon the happy couple vanished into Rothgar's tent, and the rest had the decency not to hover nearby. The camp settled down for the evening, falling back into the usual routine.

While the celebration gave everyone a veneer of good spirits, Anders could tell that Morrigan, unlike everyone else in camp, was extremely unhappy about the appearance of the Antivan Wardens. While the male Antivans greatly outnumbered their female counterparts, there were now too many female Wardens in camp for Morrigan to control, or even to keep track of. She could not force every one of them to drink her awful tea.

Mind you, she had it available, and some of the new-

comers had thanked her very politely. That said, she had no real connection with them, and could not bully them into drinking it down, the way she did with Tara or Brosca, or any other female Warden who was... er... *active*. She did not know who among them *was* active, for that matter.

Tara noticed that Morrigan was disgruntled about something. Knowing that approaching Morrigan directly was always useless, she instead decided to have it out with Anders. She slid over beside him, leaning against a tree, while Morrigan doled out cups of bitter brew.

"What's up with her? She acts as if we're all a lot of careless sluts who'll let the side down by getting knocked up. Does she think if that happens we'll run away and knit booties? Play house?"

"She's worried..."

"Come on, Anders, she's fixated on it. It's getting creepy. Even Maeve is complaining, and Maeve puts up with *everything*. She drinks that horrible stuff, and she's not even *getting* any."

"I though maybe she and Niall..."

"Hasn't happened yet. You know him. He's incredibly repressed. He can't do it in a tent, because he afraid somebody will hear. Once we get back to civilization, though, I think she'll nail him." She burst out laughing. "Nail Niall."

"You wicked girl. Zevran's a bad influence."

"We're not talking about me. We're talking about Morrigan and her obsession with everybody else's fertility."

"Look..." He was torn between keeping Morrigan's secrets and confiding in an old friend who was notably intelligent and sensible. "Look... you can never tell her I told you. You have to swear you'll never tell anyone."

"Tell anyone what?"

"You can't even tell Zevran. Swear."

She sighed heavily. "All Right. Grey Warden Honor. Pinkie swear. I won't even tell Zevran." She didn't like the idea, but it must be something big, and Anders was dying to tell her. If she had to tell Zevran, she could swear *him* to secrecy, and Anders and Morrigan didn't need to know about it.

So he told her every detail, and then winced at the look on her face.

"You're an idiot," she snapped. "You're completely out of your mind!" For a moment he thought she would hit him, and so did she.

Instead she clenched her fists and thumped the tree. Hard. "Ow..."

Anders hardly knew what else to say. "Morrigan's obsessed with this. I think Flemeth must have done something to her..."

"*Obviously!*" Tara's burning sarcasm made him deeply regret confiding in her at all. She was not done with him.

"All right," she muttered, trying to think it through. "It's some form of geas. Probably a blood magic-based spell. It's not like making her a thrall, but just fixing her mind on the necessity of doing one thing."

"Morrigan told me that Flemeth despised blood magic."

"Ha! Of course she told her that! Blood magic is *powerful*. Why would she hand Morrigan a tool like that? She could have done anything to her, since she's had her all her life, and Morrigan *would not know!*" She blew out a breath. "It's useless to try to talk her out of it if it's a *geas*. I doubt there's anything we could do to exorcise it at this point. There's no chance of slipping her the tea without her knowing, I suppose. No, of course not. We'll need to sabotage the ritual somehow. What's involved?"

"Don't know."

"Well, you'd *better* know. Get it out of her. If it involves glyphs we can alter them. If it's a hex, we can nullify it."

"I do think a potion's involved. Something to make us... er... fruitful."

"That makes sense, but I don't think I can work with that. Morrigan's sure to notice if she doesn't quicken. I'm hoping there's something else that we can modify. We need to think about keeping her far from the Archdemon."

"Bronwyn likes to have her with her..."

"If Bronwyn thought she was pregnant, she wouldn't let her anywhere near the battle. *Maybe* that can work, too."

"Maybe not. She might just shape-shift and fly in to join her."

"True. Let me think about it. And get every single detail out of her. See if she's got any kind of talisman relating to Flemeth. That might have some effect on her. Does she have a ring? An amulet? Something that she always wears?"

"There's a necklet of willow beads that she slips under

her gown. She always wears that."

"Take another look at it. I wish we could bring Jowan in on this — "

"Not Jowan."

"I know you don't like him, but he knows a lot about this sort of thing."

"Right. Blood Magic."

"Don't you get high and mighty with me, Prospective Father of the Old God Urthemiel. How do you and Morrigan think that's going to work out, anyway, when the baby smites you for singing the wrong lullaby or not changing his nappies fast enough?"

"It's not going to happen! That's why I came to you. If you don't want to help — "

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm going to help. Morrigan's going to be busy for awhile. After she's done here, keep her talking. I'll search everything she's got, while you lull her into complacency, doing your... lulling-into-complacency-thing. Pick her brain for every detail of the ritual. Be honest. Tell her you're really worried about it and you need to understand it. How do you know Flemeth's ritual won't do other things to you? I see nothing wrong with analyzing the whole process. Now go. Do it."

Tara shoved him away, fuming at all people made fools for love. Anders was supposed to be *clever*. Morrigan seemed to think she knew everything. Both of them were behaving like complete idiots. They were the pathetic

pawns of that vile old monster Flemeth, who was supposed to be dead, but probably wasn't quite dead *enough*.

Any sane person could see that Flemeth must have some sort of back-up plan, and would be scheming to swoop in, kill Morrigan and everyone with her, steal the child for whatever nefarious purpose she had, and flap away in triumph. Eventually, they would probably have to kill the rotten old bitch again.

What *was* Flemeth? More than a witch, more than a thorn in Morrigan's side. The dragon form, Tara surmised, was the big giveaway. Maybe Flemeth wasn't a witch who could assume dragon form. It was just as likely that Flemeth was a dragon who could assume *human* form. Maybe she was an Old God herself. Tara had given Flemeth quite a bit of thought over the past few months.

Records of Flemeth only went back to the end of the Towers Age, when she had suddenly appeared in Highever, married Bann Conobar Elstan, and then killed him. Not as old as an Old God, some would say, but who was to say where Flemeth had been before? Was she an Old God, trying to rescue another of her kind? How did she know about the ritual? Why would she think it would work?

Tara shivered. The ritual worried her. Was it possible that it had been tried before? Was Flemeth the product of such a ritual? Maybe from the Archdemon Toth? The dates were very close. Maybe Flemeth *knew* the ritual would work, because it already *had*.

All this was supposition, and Flemeth was unlikely to give

anyone a straight answer. She was supposed to be dead, but Tara found it difficult to believe that she had gone down so easily – unless that was her plan, for some reason. Maybe she was lulling Morrigan into complacency, letting her imagine she was safe. It was all fairly frightening.

She slipped into the tent that Anders and Morrigan shared, feeling like a traitor, but also like someone who had found a friend drunk in a gutter once too often and was trying to save her. She dug through Morrigan's possessions, found her trinket box, and sorted through her collection of jewelry with admiration. She remembered Zevran's tutelage and looked for hidden compartments. After a moment, there was a click, and a space under a false bottom was revealed.

It was a nasty looking object: a fetish more than an amulet, made of hair, hide, bone, and something that looked like fingernails, but might be horn. The remains were very old. It was intensely magical. Tara felt uncomfortable holding it, and dropped it into a pocket. She replaced everything in the box as it was, and then looked for Morrigan's grimoires. She could not read much of them, since quite a bit was in Old Almarri, and Tara had no idea who could still read that, other than Morrigan. However, it used the Arcanum alphabet, and some of the roots seemed similar. She sat down to puzzle out what she could, knowing there was not enough time.

After awhile she gave up the struggle, and put the books back. Sneaking out the tent was easy enough. Simply taking that talisman away from Morrigan might do won-



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ders for her mental health.

Zevran had been more amused than horrified at Tara's tale of the Old God baby. He stared at the unlovely object in Tara's hands. "I hope that is magic. Otherwise, I must say that it is a most unattractive souvenir of our visit to Orlais."

"It's magic," Tara admitted. "And it's still ugly. I don't know what it is, exactly, but I think it's something very, very bad. I think it's affecting Morrigan, but it's not something that's safe to just throw away."

"Does our good friend Morrigan know you have this?" Zevran asked, brows raised. "She does not seem to me to be one to share."

"I stole it from her jewelry box."

Zevran burst out laughing. "*Brava, cara mia! Brava, brava, bravissima!* Your education has not been wasted." He gave her a serious look. "Be very careful."

Tara was a little shamefaced, but pleased at the praise. "She'd probably kill me if she knew. She keeps it hidden away in a secret compartment, so she may not miss it for a long time. Anders and I are going to figure out what it is. Maybe it has something to do with Morrigan's obsession with reincarnating Urthemiel using weird Sex Magic."

"Weird Sex Magic sounds like an otherwise worthy field of study. As to the object, let us rid ourselves of it, and the sooner the better." Zevran grimaced in disgust. "Are those fingernails?"



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"Maybe."

When the darkspawn burst through the Blighted trees the next day, Sten saw no reason not to take advantage of the situation. Karasten charged them bravely enough, but did not know enough about them to target the emissary. Sten had tried to make the others understand that the darkspawn had *saarebas* of their own: powerful magic users who posed a real threat. One should always take them out first.

Karasten, however, chose to engage the biggest hurlock, an axe-wielding creature that was formidable indeed, but not the chief danger. A bolt from the emissary struck Karasten, weakening him, making him stumble. The axe came down with a wet thud. A genlock followed up, and stabbed Karasten in the back. It was over in moments.

Sten was already leaping forward, and Asala came down on the emissary's shoulder, biting through the rotten robes. Another blow and the creature was dead. After that, it was a matter of mopping up. The ten survivors looked at each other, and then, questioningly, at Sten, who was currently the ranking officer.

He was pleased that he had not had to kill Karasten himself, but had let the man's own ignorance kill him. Some people could not be saved. However, perhaps these Qunari warriors could be. It was time to take command.

"I do not know you," said Sten. "And you do not know me. What you should know, however, is that I have been fighting

darkspawn for some months, and I know their ways. We have a duty to perform. I have been ordered to collect information about the Blight, you have been ordered to retrieve the Tome of Koslun, if possible. To complete either or both of these missions, we must survive and be in a position to return to Par Vollen. Obey my commands and we will do that."

"Karasten wished to seize one of the *bas* vessels," said a sullen Arshaad.

"An unnecessary hazard. I know the *bas* commanders well. All we have to do to reach Val Royeaux with a good chance of completing our mission is to attach ourselves to the force marching against the darkspawn. The Grey Wardens will accept temporary —" he emphasized the word. "— *temporary* allies of all sorts. What is more important: Showing our disapproval of those who do not know the Qun, or completing our mission and returning to report?"

Some muttering followed, but it was clear that Sten had the right of it. The Tome was more important than their pride; more important than converting these *bas*. With the brusque nods that were Qunari usage in such cases, the rest of the Qunari expedition pledged themselves to obey Sten, their new commander. The next thing he did was go into further detail about how to fight darkspawn effectively.

Afterwards, he had the men fill their canteens from a spring running clean from a nearby outcropping, and then follow him, using the path taken by Brosca and the woman commander named Cauthrien, back to the War-

dens, and to Bronwyn, whom he trusted like no other in this strange country.

Loghain was not particularly pleased to see the band of Qunari, but Bronwyn greeted Sten in friendly fashion, and provided his people with adequate supplies to make themselves comfortable on the march. Scout wagged his tail. He had always liked Sten.

Bronwyn refrained from smiling too much at the fate of Tallis and Karasten. "So, are you going to try for the Tome of Koslun?"

"That was the mission given to the expedition. If you truly will not prevent me, I hope to complete it."

"The Tome is yours, if you can find it," Bronwyn assured him. "You have earned it, and more."

"The Tome will suffice. That, and perhaps passage in a ship to convey me and my men home."

"Done."

Sten established an area next to the Wardens, gathered his men, and told them — in discreet Qunari — how things were arranged.

"The woman Bronwyn is Warden-Commander. She is also Queen of her country. She can be regarded as commander-in-chief. Yes, she is a woman," he said, seeing the confused looks about him. "However odd it seems, certain of the Fereldans hold with an antique custom of training their women in the art of war. In her case, it is under-

standable, as she was born into the ruling caste, and learned to fight for much the same reasons as a female Ben-Hassrath. Among the Wardens, it has been tradition from their beginning over a thousand years ago to admit women. Some of the women fight; other serve as artisans and Healers. The *bas* have only a limited understanding of the dangers posed by the *saarebas*, and you will see many walking about the camp unleashed. Do not interfere with them: my experience is that these are trained not to attack you as long as you do not attack them. They are useful in combat against the darkspawn, whom, you will have noticed, have powerful magic of their own."

They were listening, at least: at this point aware that not to listen was to court a useless death. Sten went on. "You will report to me. I will report to Bronwyn. The men about her are also leaders. Treat them — and her — with cautious respect. My advice is to stay away from them, but if Bronwyn gives you an order — or the black-haired warrior with her named Loghain — you are to obey them. However, stay out of their way, and that is not likely to happen."

It was a dark day, heavy with clouds, when First Warden Wildauer finally ordered the general advance. His troops spread out on a wide, meticulously organized front. A few skirmishers darted out ahead, checking for ambushes, but behind them stretched companies of archers and arrow-bearers. They hoped to draw the horde out. Their orders

were to fire as many volleys as possible until the darkspawn were within magical range. Then, the archers were to withdraw behind the Tevinter battlemages, and the games would begin.

The Tevinters themselves had been pushing for this. It would show the world of the White Chantry how very powerful they were, and what they could inflict on their foes if the Templars kept pushing too hard.

There was always trouble on the border. Desperate apostates would run for the north, and now and then were caught just short of their goal. Even more provocatively, there had been instances in which the mages were actually within Tevinter lands, but the Templars had ignored the fact and followed in hot pursuit, killing or capturing the fugitives. This could not stand. The Archons at home had told the Tevinter Warden-Commander to show the heretics what mages could do. Not everything they could do: that would be giving too much away. But yes, they were to show them that there was a reason, if they had forgotten, why the Imperium had never fallen to the Exalted Marches.

And they never had fallen: not even in Andraste's day. They had taken the Prophet's lessons, and revered her as she deserved, but she had not conquered them, so much as *persuaded* them. The dreary succession of hags calling themselves Divines had never persuaded Tevinter of anything, except that they had been right all along. Besides, it was a deeply-held tenet of faith in Tevinter that Andraste

had herself been a powerful mage. Anyone who believed differently was not only a heretic, but a fool.

So they would light up the sky and shake the earth. They would rain down fire and poison on the darkspawn; they would fry them with thunderbolts and smash them with arcane energy. If the Archdemon was tempted out of hiding, they would be ready. A school of thought held that freezing the Archdemon in flight would cause it to crash. Five hundred mages should have no trouble destroying even an Archdemon, once it was on the ground.

Further back were the swordsmen and axemen, Nevarrans and Andermen alike, with their own mages. These mages were held in reserve, and would act primarily as Healers. The Nevarrans especially were not particularly happy about their current position, though most were willing to let the Tevinters lead the vanguard and put themselves at risk.

"Smug bastards," Athis growled to Hector Pentaghast. "I think their robes are stupid, too."

Pentaghast chuckled. He agreed. The black feathered capes smacked of people who were trying too hard to be impressive. On the other hand, Tevinter mages really *were* impressive.

A strong garrison remained in Val Chevin, defending the walls, patrolling the perimeter, and guarding the all-important harbor. The rest were marching out into the Blighted wilderness: a dead zone dotted with the corpses of men and animals.

Pentaghast understood the reason for the broad front. The mages were spread out into two ranks, one just behind the

other. There was considerable space between each mage, giving them plenty of space to wield their staffs. What was comfortable for mages was in Pentaghast's opinion a little too thin for archers, and would reduce the power of their volleys. He was not in charge, however, and it was not his decision.

From the noise ahead, a pack of bandy-legged genlocks had been started up out of cover by the scouts, who danced away at the sight of them, leaving them for the archers. It was frustrating, to be able to see so little. Some of the scouts were acting as runners, carrying news back and forth from the First Warden and to all the other commanders. It felt a bit precarious to Pentaghast, but he could think of no better plan himself.

The mages just ahead of him were moving aside, skirting a shattered wagon and a pair of rotting oxen. Pentaghast caught a glimpse through the mages to the archers in front of them, and a bit of the empty rolling fields beyond. There was a fine manor on the map that they should reach by noon, even at this slow pace, unless something happened to distract them. His own position was nowhere near the coast road, where there were a number of villages. Scouting had indicated that they were all gone, and burned to ashes for the most part.

After more trudging, he was relieved to find himself at the top of a shallow hill, which gave him a decent view. According to his map, those crumbling ruins were all that was left of the manor of Sancerre. The family and their

servants had not been seen in Val Chevin, so Pentaghast had no idea what had happened to them.

There! To the southwest, there was dust stirred up by hundreds of feet. Gradually, the dust resolved into a disorganized mob of darkspawn. Runners sped fast, and the left flank, following orders, wheeled, backs to the sea, to provide crossfire to the rest of the Wardens. Already, down the line, there were little bursts of colored light: distant fireballs cast by mages. It was too far away to see the archers' arrows.

The slow maneuver continued, and more of the line formation turned to envelop the charging darkspawn. The fireballs were bigger and closer, as the darkspawn ran at them, not exactly head-on, but at a slight angle.

There were ogres among them. That was never a good thing. Ogres could smash through men and beasts and throw a carefully-planned defense into chaos. There was no cover left, either, to use for defense. Much of the woods had been burned, and farms and manors leveled.

One of the distant ogres halted, captured in mid-stride by a spell. The sullen light reflected oddly on him. Probably a freezing spell. Other spells were been thrown at the creature, and in short order, it toppled to the ground. One down, but there were others.

"I'm sick of this," muttered Borthus. A good man, but impatient. Pentaghast did not turn to stare him down, but flicked a glance at Athis, and she did. The grumbling was briefly silenced. Out of the dust, more figures appeared.

The first charge had only been a taste of things to come. More darkspawn were on their way.

"We'll have our turn, soon enough," said Pentaghast. "But maybe not today."

The ground shook under the weight of the creatures. All along the line, archer captains shouted orders, and volleys of arrows took to the skies, creating yet more dark clouds. Squeals and squawks answered, but the darkspawn were still moving. More shouts, and the archers fell behind the mages, continuing to shoot over their heads. Then the full fury of the Tevinters was unleashed. A cry rose up from the Tevinter senior Mages. It was in old Arcanum, and thus incomprehensible to Pentaghast, but he could not complain of the results.

With uniform precision, the Tevinters all cast the same spell. The landscape was rocked by an earthquake, bizarrely localized, but insanely powerful. Even on the edges, as he was, it was disorienting. The earth before him, down the hill, trembled and split. Ogres stumbled and fell, crushing their fellow darkspawn beneath them. Weapons were dropped, creatures scrambled and crawled, wounding each other in their confusion. Another blast of magic from the Tevinters, and the sprawling darkspawn were caught in a storm of ice and lightning, slipping and crackling in an isolated band of springtime snow. Archers backed away from the onslaught.

it was hard to see what was happening in the midst of the storm, but it raged with great violence for some time.

More darkspawn appeared on the horizon. Some were stupidly sucked into the the trap. Others tried to avoid it, and were targeted by the archers and mages on either flank. The troops behind them, like Pentaghost and the other Nevarrans, decided to have a snack while they enjoyed the show.

When the storm began to die down, new orders were shouted. The second rank of mages stepped forward, and then a nightmare of fire exploded over the helpless darkspawn.

Well, almost helpless. A big hurlock burst out of the firestone, flames streaming from him, and charged the Tevinters. He bellowed, and for a moment Pentaghost thought he was speaking in actual words. The mages burst out laughing, and struck him with a paralyzing hex.

"Try to capture that one!" commanded one of the Tevinter Senior Wardens. "I want to find out what makes him that tough!"

After the flames died down, only a few bodies twitched when the spells had struck. The archers took aim and finished them off. Not even ogres had withstood the power of earth and lightning, ice and fire. The bodies were piled up in unrecognizable heaps. The Wardens edged past them, and when the army was on the other side, the mages all hit the piles of dead with more fire, burning the flesh and bone away with the Taint.

They marched on, hoping to cover more ground that day. A trickle of darkspawn contested their way, but feebly. No doubt the Archdemon had plenty more and to spare, but for

now, they were fairly safe. They made camp early, using the rolling landscape as best they could. They lit very few fires.

But some Wardens made their own entertainment. One of the campfires was at the Tevinter camp, where the senior Wardens amused themselves by restraining and vivisecting the captured hurlock. He was an alpha of some sort, but more powerful than any they had ever seen. Some were convinced that he showed signs of rudimentary intelligence.

"I wonder..." one said, musing over the creature. "Is this really a darkspawn?"

"It's certainly Tainted," replied another. "I can feel it if you can't."

"No, I know it's Tainted, but so are we, after all..." He leaned over, peering into the filmy eyes. The hideous face was constricted in what appeared to be an expression of agony. That was interesting. Darkspawn responded to the stimulus of physical damage, but they did not appear to experience pain in the way that humans did.

"Look at this," he said. He pressed a red-hot iron to the creature's scabby jaw, and it groaned. "See! I think it actually feels pain. I'm beginning to wonder if this is not a very powerful ghoul, rather than a darkspawn. A high functioning ghoul."

The mages laughed uproariously, since it was an old joke of the blackest humor for Tevinter Wardens to refer to Grey Wardens – including themselves – that way: as "high-functioning ghouls."

Their Commander, who had been watching for some time

without either commenting or cracking a smile, finally spoke up.

"You could be right. That could be what's left of a Warden."

That spoiled the fun. The creature was dosed with Quiet Death, and a complete postmortem conducted. The results were disturbing.

"Well, he wasn't one of ours," declared the Senior Warden. "We haven't sent our people off for the Calling in ages."

"Not a mage, either," pointed out a young woman, a former apostate from Starkhaven, who had eagerly Joined the Tevinter Wardens: for the power, the prestige... For the coin.

"Well, my dear," said the Senior Warden, "not *all* of us are mages."

"Only the best," snickered a joker.

The Senior Warden smiled, and gestured at the remains. "A very powerful warrior in his day. Some latent magical abilities, like all the best warriors. About fifty when he went for his Calling, which is normal. Impossible to recognize him now, of course. A pity we can't share the improved potion with the rest of the Order, but the White Chantry would squawk louder than ever about Blood Magic. Poor wretch. You," he called to a thrall. "Toss him on the fire with the rest."

Later the next day, across the low-lying plains, the First Warden's forces glimpsed the walls of Val Royeaux in the distance, gaping and shattered as broken teeth.

Another swarm of darkspawn descended: a larger one this time. The Tevinter tactics worked well, but a band of

the monsters surprised them and flanked them on the right, and then charged perpendicular to the ranks.

The Nevarrans, glad to see some action at last, laid into them with disciplined blood lust. Even the ogre, sent to wreak havoc, could not long survive. Thick ichor spattered them all. After it lay dead, something sparkling rolled out from under its breastplate. A large amethyst of the finest water glittered in Athis' bloody gauntlet.

"Finder's Keepers!" she chirped, quite chuffed about the treasure. She shoved it into a pouch on her belt, and returned to the fight.

It went on for quite a long time. The darkspawn were reinforced, again and again. The Gate of the Moon, the north gate of Val Royeaux, stood open, and from time to time, swarms of darkspawn issued from it, like blood from a wound.

Arrows darkened the skies, warriors hacked at darkspawn flesh, and mages laid down fire, endless fire. Flames licked at the Blighted grass, and only ashes marked their passing.

Bronwyn and Loghain, with the allied army, reached Charente on that same day. As expected, darkspawn squatted on the old stone bridge. It was decorated with heads: the heads of men, women, and little children; of humans and elves. The town of Val Charente, as far as they could tell, was not much more than a smoking ruin, with a few stone chimneys and crumbling walls marking the house sites. A few buildings remained: the little Chantry, the harbormas-

ter's office, part of what was once a tavern.

The march up the Greenway had been contested frequently by bands of darkspawn. As they went farther, those bands became larger and more formidable. There was a barricade on the far side of the river.

The allies had an advantage, however. Standing just off shore was the SIREN'S CALL. Isabela had sent Charade and Corbus back to Jader on her prize ship, RED QUEEN, under the command of her second mate, who was just enough enamored to be trusted. The priest who had performed Charade's marriage was traveling with them too, glad for an excuse to travel far from the Blight. Isabela had decided that the SIREN'S CALL, with its shallower draft, could get her closer to the action, and was better able to render help when needed. She sent Bronwyn a parchment explaining common naval code between ships, and could send signals using either flags by day or lanterns by night. Loghain's opinion of the woman rose accordingly.

Isabela, watching the town with her spyglass, could calculate the numbers of the darkspawn far more easily than any of the landbound scouts could from their vantage point. There were a few hundred darkspawn in Val Charente, but no more; and their fortifications were crude. In fact, Loghain was quite pleased with the situation. His greatest fear had been that the darkspawn would destroy the bridge and slow them down. They had not done that, perhaps because the Archdemon had no concept of

defense. Rather, the Archdemon wanted to maintain all possible routes in readiness, while it decided which way the horde would next march. If the allies could get across that narrow bridge, they could take the town. Loghain made his plans quickly.

Morrigan and Anders flew high and came down behind the darkspawn, perched in the bare branches of a dead tree. Tara, Niall, Jowan, and Velanna moved out of sight of the darkspawn, and prepared for battle. None of the newer recruits had yet managed shape-shifting, but they watched carefully, trying to absorb the lesson before them. The Antivan Wardens, who had not seen this particular trick before, were thrilled, and the mages among them studied every movement, every spell. This was the tactical edge they had lost with the extinction of the grifons. Now the edge was back, but in a new guise. Bronwyn would lead the charge, the happy few along with her. The rest would charge the bridge on foot, along with the dogs, once the barricades were smashed.

Meanwhile, archers spread out on the riverbank, just out of darkspawn bow shot. They moved carefully through the brush, and ducked out of sight. The ballistae were camouflaged with brush, and slowly rolled into position. The rest waited impatiently for their turn.

A few arrows came their way, but were dodged or knocked aside. Florestan shook Riordan's hand and wished the Warden luck, as Riordan went to take his place among

his comrades. The young prince nodded at the sight of Bronwyn astride the wyvern.

"There is the hero of our time. Who will believe the stories we tell of this?"

"No one who was not here, I'm afraid. But it was always thus. Be safe, my prince."

"And you, my friend."

While the darkspawn at the other end of the bridge clucked and scolded. Bronwyn and Tara moved into position, protected by a wall of shields. When everything was ready, Loghain drew his sword and gave her a nod. Bronwyn unslung her horn, and lifted it to her lips.

At the horn's call, the hidden archers stood up and poured arrows on every visible darkspawn, killing a number and forcing the rest to take cover. Ballistae launched explosive bolts at the handful of ogres. At the same moment, the shields were pulled aside, and Tara in wyvern form, with Bronwyn, Zevran, and Leliana on her back, charged across the bridge, battering logs and caltrops out of her way. Behind her, the other wyverns charged. The bridge shook, but it was built for the ages, and held under the weight. Behind the wyverns, Riordan led the Wardens on foot, and they ran like madmen. Their cheers echoed across the water, and Isabela smiled, watching the spectacle.

While the darkspawn rushed to meet the attackers, they left themselves open to the assault by two wyverns behind them. Anders and Morrigan rushed at the creatures, tails smashing

darkspawn; sleek, heavy bodies crushing them. The one thing they must not do is let themselves be surrounded and trapped.

So they kept moving: pouncing, twisting, and darting from darkspawn to darkspawn. The creatures were bewildered by the wyverns, and though their instinct was to fight and kill anything not darkspawn, they hesitated enough to make them easy prey.

The mass of darkspawn at the end of the bridge was still very dangerous. Many were knocked aside by the wyvern's charge, but they soon rallied against the Wardens on foot. It was a welter of slaughter. Behind the Wardens came a unit of the Legion of the Dead, and then Loghain brought up a company of Maric's Shield in support, along with the Circle mages as Healers. The wyverns had prevented a dangerous bottleneck at the end of the bridge, but it was still heavy going. The archers on the opposite river bank were forced to slow their rate of fire, anxious not to inflict casualties on their own people.

Bronwyn yelled to Tara to keep breaking up any rallying darkspawn. They needed to open up the battle, to prevent the darkspawn from offering any united defense. Velanna leaped past them at an ogre, her passengers in full war cry. They tumbled from their saddles as Velanna reared back, spitting venom directly into the ogre's face. A second later, her front talons slashed out, disemboweling the monster. Not much hurt by their abrupt dismount, Nuala, Steren, and Alistair were quickly on their feet, and

bringing down a swarm of genlocks.

Niall veered left, and began a perimeter run around the darkspawn, while Adaia and Siofranni bombarded the creatures with grenades. Jowan turned right, thundering along the town dockyards. Half-way in, Brosca, Oghren, and Sigrun launched themselves from his back, and waded into the fight, attacking the darkspawn from the flank.

The force of the attack pushed the darkspawn back, back, past the few standing houses. Here and there, darkspawn made a stand, hiding in the shadows or lurking behind rubble, and then leaped out to kill. Thus died five new Wardens, not yet able to sense the creatures. Others died, too, for darkspawn never surrendered. Even after anyone else would have considered themselves victors, the Wardens still had to comb through every building and brave every cellar to kill the last of the darkspawn. Carver's dog Magister smelled some huddled under the piers, and flushed them out. Securing the area took quite a long time. The worst horror was the Chantry, where most of the women and children had sought refuge. Florestan went in there with the Orlesian Wardens. After a time, he stumbled out and sat wordlessly on the steps, wiping the vomit from his mouth.

They had to recognize that Val Charente was filthy with Taint. The darkspawn had not just moved through here: they had taken up residence. It was impossible for the army to stay here, and so a camp was established a good distance beyond in a field by the sea just above high tide.

Mages burned it off, leaving a blackened but fairly safe area for the tents. The army was moved quickly through the town, and told not to touch, not to loot. A hard order to enforce when the soldiers could see the Wardens picking through the rubble and searching the darkspawn bodies.

"Some of them will sneak back through the sentries," said Loghain.

"You can't save everyone," Bronwyn shrugged. "If they sicken, then I'll have new recruits."

She was sorry to lose any Wardens, but had hardly known the casualties. She would note them down in her recruitment rolls, recording their brief service. Nearby, Visconti was celebrating with his Antivan Wardens. They had enjoyed their first pitched battle against the darkspawn. They treated the shape-shifters as heroes, and at the moment were crowding around Niall and Jowan; offering them drinks, slapping them on the back, giving Lily treats and praise.

Visconti grinned at Bronwyn. "Next time you let us go in first, eh?"

"I want to ride a wyvern," shouted an Antivan.

"I want to *be* a wyvern!" countered one of their mages.

Loghain raised a brow at her, clearly thinking that a splendid idea.

Bronwyn smiled wryly. "Absolutely."

Smoke still rose in lazy white threads from the town and the plains beyond. It poured blackly from the pyres

for the dead. A thick haze muddled the horizon to the northeast, where Val Royeaux lay waiting.



HECTOR PENTGHAST, WARDEN COMMANDER

CHAPTER 22

T

SOUTH OF THE
SUN AND
NORTH OF THE
MOON

HE VERY AIR TASTED OF TAINT.

Reluctantly, Bronwyn opened her eyes, not knowing if sleeping or waking was worse. Her dreams had been ghastly: a pit of despair filled with grotesque, swollen bodies; with agonized cries as forms changed into things that should never have existed. It was deliberate, no doubt. The Archdemon wanted to demoralize them.

Yes, she was rather demoralized. She was no less determined to end that monster, and give a merciful death to the darkspawn's victims. Loghain eyed her with some concern, but did not subject her to an interrogation. Bronwyn had no desire to put what she had seen into words. She had not slept well last night, and she had not slept well the night before. Making love was simply not possible in her current state.

Instead she washed. She brushed, braided, and pinned up her hair securely. She put on clean undergarments and her underpadding, and she and Loghain buckled each other into their armor, with as few words said as possible. Bronwyn sup-

posed she should eat something. Grey Wardens were always hungry, but she knew everything would taste like Taint. She would force herself to eat anyway. It might be her last meal if things went badly. Or even if things went very well.

She opened the case where her Airbow lay stored. A small number of the weapons had been distributed. A squad of Astrid's dwarves had them now – regular army, not Legion of the Dead. Adaia had done fairly well with this weapon. Bronwyn considered lending her this weapon for the duration. She could not give it away, since it was a gift from the Paragon herself, but Bronwyn was already heavily armed. Yes. She would slip the Airbow over to Adaia later, and tell Astrid that the elf was giving it a field testing for her.

The dogs nosed about. Scout's warm brown eyes were on her, wanting to know that she was all right. She took a moment to sit down and rub his ears and make much of him. When all this was over, he deserved green fields and sunshine and plenty of rabbits to chase.

Amber had found someone's sock and had chewed it to bits. Loghain would ordinarily have reproved her, but the sock was clearly not his, and not Bronwyn's, and so was fair game if the owner was too incompetent to protect his belongings. Amber brought it to Loghain with a hopeful air, and he indulged her by tugging on it. Amber clearly thought it all great fun, pretending to growl ferociously.

"They've laid out breakfast, Your Majesties," the tent guard told them, speaking through the canvas.

"Very well." Loghain tilted his head to the tent flap. "Shall we?" Bronwyn managed a smile. "I suppose we must."

Porridge was the last thing she wanted, but she needed to choke it down. It would be a long, hard slog today, and very likely with Val Royeaux at the end of it.

Astrid was up and doing very early, unlike Bronwyn. She washed, dressed, armored, while thinking ahead, beyond today's battle.

I just want this over and done.

Once the Blight was over, she had plans for her life. She had her thaigs to improve, her army to rally, and a crown to win. The longer this Blight lasted, the harder it was on the dwarven people. There was much she could do for them, and she was ready to settle down to doing it. With patience and tact, she might be able to create regular communication between Orzammar and faraway Kal'Sharok, embittered over many ages by what it regarded as Orzammar's desertion.

She was eager to face the Horde. She thought they were in a very good tactical position, now that she knew about the other Warden army, pressing Val Royeaux from the north. Their own force was not alone. They had excellent, advanced weapons, they had mages who could take the form of monsters, they had hundreds of Wardens, they had support troops, and their supplies were holding out. They would face the Archdemon, and they would kill it. And then they could go home. Some Warden would perish in killing the Archdemon,

but Astrid knew that it was not likely to be the Paragon of Orzammar. She would kill any other darkspawn – as many as she could – but not that one. She could not be spared.

Strapping on the hand she used for fighting, Astrid went through a mental list of potential allies and adversaries. She had won Piotin Aeducan to her. There was nothing like fighting side by side for strengthening a bond. Bhelen had never risked himself, and so had lost that advantage. Once the Blight was over, the battle for Orzammar would begin... on the floor of the Assembly.

"Once the Archdemon is dead, the Blight is over. It can't happen too soon for me!"

Brosca sat up and grinned at Torvald. This was hard on him, poor kid. He was smith caste, and not a warrior at all.

"You stick with the wagons today," she said, giving him a playful slap. He groaned and looked ready to hide under the blanket.

"Come on. Get up!" she insisted. "Get something to eat. I'm going to be busy today. You stick back there with the luggage. We'll need you if one of the gadgets breaks down, but there's no use risking yourself until then."

"But the Blight will be over once the Archdemon's dead, won't it?"

He sounded like a plaintive little boy. Brosca ruffled his bright hair. It was like gold... and gold was a very good thing.

"We'll... not *all* over," she told him, sorry to give him bad news. "There'll still be darkspawn on the surface that

we'll need to wipe out. It's called the Thaw. It won't be nearly as bad, though. Just some pockets here and there. We'll hunt 'em down, one by one. It won't be like this."

"Good. I hate this. Everything stinks."

"Yeah, yeah, it does. Smells worse than Dust Town. You be careful, *sal roka*, you hear? Keep your hands washed and your gloves on, and don't handle anything that might be Tainted. Which is everything, at this point. Come on, get some clothes on. I'm starving!"

Adaia bounced up from her blanket, eliciting complaints from Siofranni.

"Come on! Rise and shine!"

Siofranni tossed a pillow at her. "*You rise! You shine!*"

Adaia laughed, and dug through her pack for her last clean shirt. She might as well wear it today. She tossed on her light leathers, fastening them with extra care. She had cleaned everything last night, so it was all looking pretty good. Glancing in her little handmirror, she thought she looked pretty good, considering.

Most of her loot was in her chest in the baggage train, but she had a special box that she kept with her. While Siofranni snored daintily, catching the last fragments of sleep before the dawn, Adaia entertained herself picking through her favorite treasures.

"I'm rich!" she whispered. "Rich as a noble!"

She was, too. She was richer than the whole Alienage.

Richer by far. She had a sapphire that would buy everything in Alarith's little store ten times over. She had gold. She had fine armor and weapons and beautiful silk clothes for the day when they would celebrate the end of the Blight.

Never would she be married off to a stranger. She was a Grey Warden, and needed no arranged marriage to validate her. Siofranni had been a surprise to her, but maybe because she had simply never met another elf she genuinely found attractive, male or female. She and Siofranni were a couple. They were a team. Wherever they went, they'd go together.

And once the Blight was over, the real war could begin: her own personal war. Merrill and Lanaya could lead the people to the Dalish homeland, and some could start going through, one by one, to the secret land of the elvhen. That was fine for them, but Adaia had work to do.

She and Siofranni would round up some of their friends: Tara and Zevran, of course, and Cathair and Darach, Nuala and Steren, and maybe Velanna too, if she could behave herself. They might see if Fenris would go with them. He was haughty and standoffish, but she thought he'd like the adventure she planned. They were rich enough to hire a ship. Maker, they were rich enough to *buy* a ship. They would sail for Tevinter, and give the slavers a taste of what it was like to be hunted and harried. They would steal people from them... not to be made slaves, but to be made free.

She had talked to Fenris about what it was like to travel by ship. He did not seem to like it much, and told her that it was

complicated. Sailors had lots of special knowledge about how to make ships work and how to get places. Adaia knew that was true, from the times she had found work at the Denerim docks. Sailors had a language of their own. Maybe she should learn some of that. If you didn't know things, shems could cheat you. There was that woman pirate Broasca had met: Captain Isabela. Maybe she'd teach them about sailing, for a price. Adaia grinned, imagining swaggering on the deck of her very own ship. Captain Adaia, Terror of the Tevinters!

Duke Prosper awoke, irritated, to the sound of Prince Florestan's voice outside his tent, speaking earnestly to his servant, that brute Ursus.

"Take care of yourself, too! I don't want you sacrificing yourself for me! You've done enough."

"I know my duty, my prince."

"Well... don't get yourself killed. I'd miss you."

There was a warm chuckle from both of them, and Prosper rolled his eyes at such sappy sentiment. Really, he must have a word with some of his people about Florestan. If they ran into heavy opposition, it was very likely that the young prince would meet with a misadventure. He was an untidy loose end, and Prosper intended that nothing should impede his grasp on power.

Once the Blight was over, he would have to move quickly. Florestan was only the first obstacle. They must deal with the Fereldans, and get them out of the country with the greatest

possible dispatch. It was too much to hope that Loghain Mac Tir would die in battle. It would take more than darkspawn to put an end to that jumped-up peasant. It was a scandal that the Queen had been forced to sully herself with such a creature.

He meant no harm to Bronwyn, indeed. It was clear that she was favored by the Blessed Prophet. Moving against her personally would be... impious. If it were only she who was here with her army, Prosper would have assisted her departure with every comfort and assurance of good will. The presence of Loghain, however, rankled. He was not the only one who felt that way. Old grudges had surfaced, and had been poured into his ear. He had replied that they needed the man — for now — but once the Archdemon was slain, he would not stand in the way of rightful revenge. A pity that Boniface Clery was now a Warden, and apparently totally devoted to Bronwyn. Berthold de Guesclin, too, had been discreetly approached about Loghain, and refused to hear Prosper out, citing the Queen's noble generosity, apparently feeling honor-bound *in perpetuo*. Prosper would have to find another tool. First things first. Today he would ride Leopold into battle. Safer for him, a good way to deal maximum damage to the darkspawn, and the best way to solidify his image as the leader that Orlais must have in the future.

And Leopold would enjoy it.

Anders woke up, both incredibly relaxed and incredibly guilty. He had meant to question Morrigan about the ritual.

Really. He had meant to *question* her, and point out the problems, the dangers. He hadn't meant to *perform* the ritual.

But there she was, stretching languorously, pleased with herself... and him. She gave him one of her smiles, and he smiled back, knowing he must look a complete fool. Tara was going to kill him.

He tried be casual, but his voice came out as a squeak. "So, do you think..." he coughed, and went on in his normal register. "Do you think it worked?"

"I know it did."

"You mean... you're sure..."

"Absolutely. Can you not tell?"

He usually could, but after only few hours? He sat up, summoned his scattered mana, and laid glowing hands on Morrigan's taut, silken belly. Maybe that little sparkle... no... he couldn't be sure.

"Maybe. Early days."

"Of course." She stretched, slipping out from the blanket, and reaching for her smallclothes. Then she paused, and kissed him lightly. "My thanks. You performed well."

He grinned. "We've had plenty of practice."

"Indeed we have."

"It's just so... precarious." He groped for his own garments. "Look what happened to Bronwyn. Maybe you could... I don't know... be more careful?"

Her throaty laugh made it clear that the hope was futile. "After our battle yesterday? Now you want me to be care-

ful? It seemed to me that you thoroughly enjoyed smashing darkspawn as much as I."

"I just don't want them to smash *you*."

She paused, quite touched. She liked Anders. She had liked him from the first. He was good to look upon. He was magically powerful. He had been considerate and amenable to her wishes. Nor was he a fool, other than when she wished him to be. That he cared so much for her was quite... well... it was foolish and sentimental, but gratifying, all the same. He would no doubt be quite devoted to the child.

"Nothing will stand in our way," she soothed him. "The Archdemon will be slain and the darkspawn defeated. Bronwyn and all our friends will survive to celebrate their feats for years to come in the halls of Soldier's Peak. Our child will be educated as a mage child should be: with rigorous standards and fearless honesty; not like some hedge mage, trembling with fear."

Briefly, she sensed a curious change in her surroundings; as if she were missing something. The sensation was fleeting. Anders kissed her distractingly, and they returned to their pleasant practice.

"Ow."

"Too much wine, *cara mia*."

"Too much wine and too much worrying about Morrigan and too much bloody Archdemon," Tara grouched, rubbing her head. "I had awful dreams."

"I wish I could share your burden."

Tara laughed, and then winced. "I wish you could, too. We could join up and fight the Archdemon in the Fade." She blinked. "I wonder if that's possible..."

"It sounds like you do plenty of fighting already. Come, there is hot water."

"Amazing. I'll give the servitors a big tip."

Tara's thoughts strayed to the perilous amulet hidden away in her little locked box. Could dragon fire destroy it? Maybe not. She had promised not to tell Jowan about Morrigan's secret, but maybe she could phrase it as a hypothetical question and pick his brain. Jowan was always ready to help.

Maybe not today. She dressed, forcing a smile for Zevran. Today was going to be rough.

Clever as he was, he saw past the pretense. He took her face gently in his hands.

"We shall not die today, my Warden. Not today and not tomorrow. Today is a good day to *live*."

Sten sharpened Asala in the early grey light. One by one, his soldiers awakened, most of them satisfactorily alert and efficient. When all were awake and armored, they stood together, and Sten spoke words of the Qun.

"Existence is a choice.

There is no chaos in the world, only complexity.

Knowledge of the complex is wisdom.

From wisdom of the world comes wisdom of the self.

Mastery of the self is mastery of the world. Loss of the self is the source of suffering.

Suffering is a choice, and we can refuse it."

Then he said, "Let us go forth to battle, but first we shall eat, and strengthen ourselves. I have been informed by Bronwyn that cookies will be provided for us."

A scout asked, "What are 'cookies?'"

Sten did not smile outwardly, but inside he glowed with the pleasure of bringing a new, good thing to his people.

"You shall soon see, Ashaad. You shall see, and learn."

The dogs were awake before Carver and Jowan. Others shared the big tent: Oghren, Ser Silas, Niall, Quinn, and Fenris. Fenris was up even before the dogs, awakened by the restless, demon-haunted sleep of the Wardens. Another reason never to join the order.

Carver looked like a boy, curled up under his blanket. Quinn was a boy, for all his height and muscle. Life could be merciless. Would they survive today? For today they might well find themselves before the walls of Val Royeaux, besieging monsters from the days of the ancient magisters.

Another evil by-product of magic. Magic was evil, however useful this army found it. Fenris liked Jowan personally – and liked his dog even better – but it was clear that Jowan would be a menace without the discipline and control imposed on him by the Grey Wardens. Niall, too, appeared a decent fellow, but who knew what he would

have become had he been born in Tevinter? Their conscription into the Wardens was making the best of a bad situation. Personally – though he knew better than to say this aloud – Fenris thought the Qunari handled mages more sensibly than any other culture in Thedas.

But for better or worse, they were all in this together. Carver had taken him aside, and reminded him that he, Fenris, must not be the one to strike the final blow against the Archdemon. Some unspecified horror would fall upon them if any but a Warden slew the creature. That said, anything that could be done to disable, to weaken, to damage the creature would be more than welcome.

What would the world be like, after the Blight? Fenris suspected it would be different in ways that no one had foreseen. As long as there was a small corner for him, perhaps he should not complain.

Riordan grew weary of nightmares, and lay looking up into darkness until light began seeping through the canvas of the tent. Early, still, but not too early to face the day. He smiled, wondering if it would be his last. If it were, he would also make it his best.

Savaged and decimated as they were, the morale of his Wardens was fairly high. The presence of the allies had done much to raise their hopes. They knew that Fiona and her party were alive in Val Foret.

Clovis and Fabrice were particularly happy to be back under

Riordan's command and among their friends once more. Minjonet had enjoyed her adventure, and had nothing but good things to say about Queen Bronwyn and her Fereldans. They were here, after all, without even having to be asked.

Bronwyn. Riordan smiled again. A fine lass, indeed, just as he had thought when they first met. The very finest. She had been wiser than them all, in the end. Becoming Queen of Ferelden was not a foolish entanglement, as he had feared, but the only way to bring the full power of her country to bear against the darkspawn. A Grey Warden did whatever was necessary, after all. Duncan might well have saved Thedas when he recruited her.

That said, it was *not* necessary for her to die. Riordan's heart rebelled at the image. She was too young, and had too much of her life before her. She had already done so much.

Besides, the horde was in Orlais. The Archdemon had usurped Val Royeaux. Riordan thought it very important that an Orlesian put an end to the Blight. He was the oldest Warden in camp – even older than Visconti, based on Joining date. He was nearing his Calling. It was only fit and proper that he should be the sacrifice.

The greatest difficulty, he mused, would be getting between Bronwyn Cousland and what she perceived as her duty.

"Blessed Andraste," whispered Leliana, not wanting to wake Aveline and Maeve. "Make me fast and accurate today. Maker, let my aim be true and my hand quicker than those

who would seek to destroy me. Grant me victory over my foes, and those that wish to do harm to me and mine..."

Aveline blinked awake. "Were you talking to me, Leliana?"
"I was just praying. It should be an exciting day."

This might be the end, and that was all right. Alistair stepped out of the tent with Scrapper, and looked at the dark and turbulent sky. It would be a red dawn, but he felt curiously lighthearted.

Bronwyn must live through this. Ferelden needed its queen. She had heaped honors and titles on Alistair, because she was a true friend and wanted to do things for him. Bronwyn's presents were always the best. The problem was that she now gave him things she thought he *ought* to want. Just as he thought he might be able to cope with being Bann of Stonehaven, she made him Arl of Jader. He couldn't see it, though his friends pretended they could. She had better not make him a teyrn, though, or he'd run away to Weisshaupt. Or he would have, if he didn't have something much more important to do at the moment...

He had never had so much to live for. He had been given a beautiful city and a princess to marry. Eglantine was really pretty and really nice. Sometimes he could almost imagine how good his life might be. Emrys would help him, he knew. Ser Blayne and Ser Norrel, too. He wasn't cut out to be a nobleman, but he would have to do his best.

What about the Jader Wardens? They were Orlesians. Riordan, of course, was now the Orlesian Warden-Com-

mander, though he never used the title. After the Blight, the survivors would go back to Montsimmard to rebuild.

Forget the Jader Wardens. What about Fiona? Why couldn't she stay in Jader? They could use an experienced Warden. Or would Bronwyn keep the Jader post operational? It made sense, since it was so close to Orzammar. Would he still act as a Warden? Or would he be a prisoner of the Emerald Palace? Could he be both Senior Warden of Jader and Arl? There was a precedent, after all.

It was pointless to worry about any of this. He had a mission, and that took priority over everything else.

Fiona insisted that he could never reveal that she was his mother. It was unfair, but that was life. The one thing he would insist on was that Fiona be given the improved potion. No mother of his would face a Calling in the darkness of the Deep Roads. In his opinion, all their fellow Wardens should share in the discovery. They were his brothers and sisters, after all, though he had some reservations about the Tevinters.

He had written that request about the potion down in what might well be his last will and testament. Nobles were supposed to have wills. Alistair would never forget how furious Bronwyn had been with Cailan for not having one ready. Since Alistair was a nobleman now, with coin and lands, he had taken the trouble to give his opinion about what should happen, if he were the one to kill the Archdemon.

Or if he were simply one of the many to fall in battle. Eglantine might even be sad. They'd have to find a new

Arl for her. Too bad he hadn't stolen a kiss; it would have been nice to have kissed a girl... ever. He had left instructions to give her a keepsake: an emerald pendant from the Deep Roads around Ostagar.

Someone had to kill the Archdemon.

Why not me?

The Dalish Wardens joined their fellow elvhen, facing east to the Sun, while Lanaya offered prayers to Mythal the Great Protector. Though the rest of the sky was overcast with the darkness of the Blight, a patch of light shown clear in the east over the Waking Sea, far beyond the power of the Archdemon. The sweet elven words washed the bitterness from their hearts, and before they dispersed to breakfast, Merrill told them the TALE OF MYTHAL'S TOUCH:

Elgar'nán, God of Vengeance, had defeated his father, the sun, and all was covered in darkness. Pleased with himself, Elgar'nán sought to console his mother, the earth, by replacing all that the sun had destroyed. But the earth knew that without the sun, nothing could grow. She whispered to Elgar'nán this truth, and pleaded with him to release his father, but Elgar'nán's pride was great, and his vengeance was terrible, and he refused.

"It was at this moment that Mythal walked out of the sea of the Earth's tears and onto the land. She placed her hand on Elgar'nán's brow, and at her touch he grew calm and knew that his anger had led him astray. Humbled, Elgar'nán went to the place where the

sun was buried and spoke to him. Elgar´nan said he would release the sun if the sun promised to be gentle and to return to the earth each night. The sun, feeling remorse at what he had done, agreed.

“And so the sun rose again in the sky, and shone his golden light upon the earth. Elgar´nan and Mythal, with the help of the earth and the sun, brought back to life all the wondrous things that the sun had destroyed, and they grew and thrived. And that night, when the sun had gone to sleep, Mythal gathered the glowing earth around his bed, and formed it into a sphere to be placed in the sky, a pale reflection of the sun’s true glory.”

Breakfast was quiet, but not especially gloomy. They were all particularly kind to one another, gentled by the prospect before them. The enemy they faced was so terrible that the differences among themselves seemed petty by comparison. Ostap and Bustrum had established themselves as leaders among the newest Wardens. Their calm attitude toward the coming battle did a great deal to hearten their peers.

The mages and Templars were having a pleasant breakfast together. Some of the army mages had joined their old friends from the Circle, and there was a hum of gossip. Greagoir and Irving presided like a pair of grandfathers: one gruff and no-nonsense, the other kindly and comforting. Keili sat at the far end of the trestle table, as she always did, hoping that today would be the day that her curse – the terrible curse of magic – was lifted.

Wulffe was trying hard to lift his son’s spirits. Roth-

gar’s brief wedding night must seem a dream to him now, as he woke to the horrible reality of the coming battle. Bronwyn wished she had sent him home, too. Wulffe had another son, now ruling West Hills in his father’s stead, but the Wulfes were loyal, and in some ways doing far more than their share.

Loghain ordered the war machines brought forward, since he thought it would best if they were available, just behind the vanguard. The preparations were held up by a temperamental wyvern. Duke Prosper’s Leopold did not want to go back into his caged wagon, once he was fed and exercised. Prosper then announced that he would be riding the creature. Clearly, he wanted to make a statement of some sort.

There was time for talk during the delay. A number of Circle mages clung to the Wardens they knew from their days together: Anders, Niall, Jowan, and Tara, wanting to pick their brains about shape-shifting. Tara tried to turn the conversation to another brilliant magical application, but the concept of the Arcane Warrior eluded many of the mages. It was at once too alien and not obviously magical *enough*. Tara sighed. A handful of Dalish mages had learned the discipline, and she would have to be satisfied with that. Maybe it really was something only for elves.

As they were preparing to strike camp, a cry rose from the lookouts. The ships offshore were signaling to them. The Marcher Wardens had arrived: almost too late, but not quite. Excitement rose while the five ships approached, their sails

bright with blue and silver. When they dropped anchor in the little harbor of Val Charente, the ships' boats were launched, and the Wardens of Ansborg began arriving, a dozen at a time.

Their Warden Commander clambered out of the boat and strode eagerly down the pier. He spotted Bronwyn — a tall young woman in red armor, and made directly for her.

"Errol Sainsby," he said, extending his hand for a warrior's wristclasp. His glance searched over her, and settled on her poison-green eyes. "You must be Bronwyn Cousland!"

Bronwyn smiled, and returned the gesture heartily. "I am." She introduced Loghain, Astrid, Prosper, Visconti (whom he had met before), Riordan, Merrill, Prince Florestan, Knight-Commander Greagoir, First Enchanter Irving, and Alistair. Sainsby introduced his command team, and was inexpressibly relieved not to have missed the war.

"We decided to follow you by ship," he explained. "I thought it likely that you'd swept up all the local supplies on your march, and we didn't bring horses for supply wagons, anyway. It seemed easier this way."

He commanded one hundred ten Wardens, thirty-fivenon-Warden mages, and five ships. His ships, they were glad to hear, were loaded with supplies. They would have to delay their departure somewhat, but it was quickly agreed that the supplies would mostly remain on the ships, which would join with Isabela's little flotilla, shadowing them as they went north. Loghain ordered a signal to the SIREN'S CALL, requesting Captain Isabela join them for a council of war.

She arrived quickly, jumping up to the pier, swaggering ashore in her thigh-high boots. She had always wanted a look at Bronwyn and Loghain. Maybe she'd even have a chance to catch up with the gorgeous Fenris. She gave the dignitaries her most polished bow, graceful to the point of impudence. She gave the famous Red Queen a once-over, and decided that she wouldn't turn her down if the chance ever offered. Unlikely, but you never knew. For that matter, she wouldn't turn down the King either. Maybe a threesome... She indulged in the most depraved speculations as they all retired to a clearing, where soldiers had placed a table and a number of chairs and benches.

Sainsby gave them a brief accounting of his recruitment efforts and his journey, not failing to mention the antipathy shown by Kirkwall and its Knight-Commander, Meredith Stannard.

"Refused! Outright refused! She wouldn't allow us to have any mages from Kirkwall, nor Templars either! Said that the Grey Warden Order is a refuge for criminals and apostates!"

"Well..." Visconti whispered to Riordan, trying not to laugh. "It is."

Riordan coughed, wiping the sudden grin from his face. Bronwyn looked their way, with a carefully innocent expression. They all smiled pleasantly. She looked at Sainsby, too, who then shrugged.

"And we conscripted quite a few runaways before we sailed. But that's not the point. The *de facto* ruler of Kirkwall refused

assistance in a time of acknowledged Blight. That cannot stand.”

“I entirely agree,” said Bronwyn. “The Blight is our first priority. Afterwards, however, I think that the Wardens should meet and take counsel about people, who, like this Knight-Commander Meredith, in effect allied themselves with the darkspawn.”

“Deal with her as you like,” Loghain said harshly. Kirkwall was a maritime rival of Ferelden. “But later. She’s not the only one who let others bear the burden while remaining safely at home.”

Greagoir fidgeted on his bench, but found it impossible to protest. He was not sure he wanted to, since he was here, and Meredith obviously was not.

They buckled down to practical matters. There was no time to waste on fine speeches.

The horses had already been sent back to the camp at the Orne, guarded by a small force. There was no pasturage for horses here in the Blighted Lands. There was no pasturage for the oxen, either, but the army needed them. Isabela was instructed to keep two of her ships rotating on runs to the seaports to buy up what fodder they could.

Personal possessions, too, would have to be left behind. Food and arms were the priorities. The army might resent a separation from its loot, but there was nothing else to be done.

Bronwyn began to understand more clearly now why it was so terribly hard to fight the Blight. The logistical problems were huge. Finding untainted water required skilled

images, and there was no food at all to be requisitioned or scavenged. As it was, the Marcher ships were a godsend, and they were likely to eat up all those supplies within days.

Besieging the darkspawn in Val Royeaux for an extended period would be impossible. The non-Warden components, at least, would have to leave soon, especially if large numbers of soldiers became Tainted. Supplying the troops would get harder and harder. Soon they would have to be supplied completely by sea. What if the Archdemon took notice of their ships, and destroyed them? They would have to retreat in that case, and many would die on the march.

Loghain glanced again at his map, now a little grubby from much handling. It was stretched out on the table, pinned flat. Val Royeaux was less than half a day away. They needed to march, but sensibly.

“Captain Isabela, I want you and your remaining ships to keep following us along the coast. The Marcher ships, too, take the lead, since you know the waters around here the best. Let us know what you see.”

“No problem, Your Majesty,” Isabela said, with just a hint of a saucy look. “I’ll stick to the shoreline like a wet silk nightgown.”

Loghain gave her a brief look that suggested that if they were alone, he’d have said something about her attitude. She wondered what it would be like to get past the stony facade. Stony? More like rock-hard, and probably in a good way. She wondered if his Red Queen knew how to

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stoke the hidden fires... and Isabela was now absolutely certain that there were some pretty hot fires hidden there. Hard to tell. Bronwyn had that upper-class manner that sometimes put Isabela off – just listen to those plummy vowel sounds – and she was obviously terribly earnest and sincere and all that was goody-good. She should let her hair down and live a little, but Isabela granted that she probably hadn't had much time for that. Out of the schoolroom and into the Blight, more or less, poor girl.

For his part, Loghain found it hard to believe that the bloody pirate woman had just flirted with him in front of his wife and the entire allied command. Should he be offended or flattered? Bronwyn was diligently studying the map, the faintest smile on her lips.

What nonsense. It was just the way the woman talked to everyone. She was doing her job, and that was what mattered. And there was more reconnaissance to be arranged. He turned to an aide, and ordered him to summon Warden Anders. He and that witch of his should be able to tell him what they were walking into. While the mages were scouting as birds, the army would move on to Val Royeaux.

The soldiers were restless; ready to march. A few struck up that song of theirs.

*“When evil stalks upon the land
I’ll neither hold nor stay my hand,
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.”*

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*O'er the hills and o'er the bourne
Through Jader, Lydes, Verchiel, and Orne.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.”*

First Warden Reinhard Wildauer had always believed he had a good idea of what a Blight was really like. It was distressing – perhaps even humbling – to realize that he had been wrong all along. Nothing he imagined was anything as bad as this.

The darkspawn had not ceased to attack. The creatures trickled out of the Gate of the Moon, or sometimes charged in force. Forays flared up randomly. It was impossible to make a normal camp. Instead, he was forced to improvise. Various units were brought up to hold the line, while exhausted Wardens moved back to the baggage train to swallow a hasty meal and sleep wherever they could find a patch of bare ground to collapse on.

Even the Tevinters, as powerful as they were, could not hold their ground indefinitely. They too, needed rest, and mages from the Anderfels took their place on the center and left flank, and the Nevarrans and Rivainnis on the right.

Those latter did not work particularly well together, since their magical styles were very different. The Rivainnis had a Circle, yes; and learned magic there. The Rivainnis, however, were not very orthodox Andrasteans – when they were Andrastean at all – and much of their magic

seemed primitive, even shamanistic, to the Nevarrans.

That being said, it was powerful. The fetishes the Rivainnis used to hex the darkspawn caused the skin of the creatures to slough off, made them turn on each other, made them claw at themselves. Swarms of stinging insects rose up from the fetid marshes and settled on the darkspawn, bewildering them. Tainted creatures raced across the ashy plains, snarling and tearing at the darkspawn, and ignoring the Wardens altogether.

And the attacks intensified at sunset. Wildauer had always understood that darkspawn avoided the sun when they could, and preferred darkness. He had wondered if that were true, seeing how bold they were in the day. With night, he learned that he had not been wrong. Darkspawn really did prefer the night.

They were forced to supply their mages with lyrium now, as the assaults grew in frequency and in numbers. They were exposed out here in the plains north of Val Royeaux. They were not close enough to storm the walls, which would have been suicide, anyway. Neither were they close enough to be in danger from archers on the walls and towers. Archers who emerged from the city and tried to shoot them were picked off fairly quickly by their own archers and by the mages. Even emissaries could be killed at a distance, and that was certainly the best way all around. The greatest danger was the raw, Tainted vigor of ogres, and their accompanying genlocks and hurlocks,

armed with swords, axes, and maces. Time after time they surged through the lines, and brought Wardens down before being mobbed and slain themselves.

Some remarkably stupid Rivainni archers thought it would be a good idea to use fire arrows, thinking they could set the grass on fire and more easily see darkspawn creeping forward through the dead grass. They set the grass on fire, all right.

"Fire!" Athis shouted, pointing. "Fire!"

It was spreading quickly, snapping and snarling, fanned by a south wind. The wildfire was coming their way.

Pentaghast roared for mages, but their spells could only freeze the earth ahead of the fire and slow it. Frantically, the Nevarrans, and then the Rivainnis and the Andermen, all began frantically digging a firebreak.

Dozens of Tevinter mages, heavy-eyed and sleepy, stumbled forward from the baggage train and set a series of backfires across the firebreak to change the direction of the burn. The blaze licked at them, tall as an ogre, blackening silver griffons with soot, scorching at faces. The backfires crackled up to meet it, and it roared away, forced to the west and south, surging toward the road and the walls of Val Royeaux. Everywhere, the Blighted grass and brush caught fire, burning, burning a path that only stopped briefly at the Imperial Highway. Sparks and tufts of wind-born grass blew over the ancient stones, and the grass on the other side was instantly alight.

A large band of darkspawn was caught in the fire and

every one of them roasted, their shrill squeals carrying in the wind. And ogre waded through it, too imbecilic to understand its danger. Horns wreathed in flame, it actually made it halfway to the Wardens' lines before it stumbled and went down. It crawled and twitched for some time before it was still.

The fire stopped the attacks for some hours.

"A breathing space," Pentaghast said gratefully.

"By *accident*," Athis replied. "It's a wonder it didn't kill us all."

"Any rest has to help us," said Pentaghast. "This is going to take time. The darkspawn might well outnumber us ten to one."

Borthos overheard them, and grinned. "Maybe I should go home then," he joked. "I already killed my ten."

A haze of smoke clung to the ground; another layer obscured the sky. The fire died down over most of the plain, but persisted in places. Corpses of darkspawn and animals burned. So did stunted trees and shattered, abandoned wagons. Some scaffolding at the north wall caught fire. Repair work had been going on there until the fall of the city. All the Wardens, from Wildauer to the rawest recruit, were sorry to see it go, since it had looked like another route into the city. The heavy beams and supports burned for a long time. When some of the smoke from the grass fire cleared, the light from the fire at the wall illuminated the darkspawn nearby.

A few bands of scouts crept closer, behind mobile shields called mantlets that could be wheeled out by a team of

sappers. Behind the mantlets were archers and mages, who tried picking off the shambling figures at the top of the wall. Wildauer and the other commanders watched through their fine spyglasses. Every time a darkspawn fell, Pentaghast gave a wave to his Wardens, and a cheer rose up. The darkspawn tried to retaliate, but the good silverite of the mantlets thwarted their efforts. Not even a ballista at a guard tower succeeded in penetrating the armor.

It was good sport until well after midnight. Another mantlet was rolled out, and the first teams was told to get some rest. The Wardens who slept, slept very badly, moaning and thrashing. When they relaxed somewhat, most of those on watch breathed a sigh of relief.

Pentaghast made the effort to sleep, laying uncomfortably on the damp and Tainted ground, his neck and jaw prickled by dead grass. The Archdemon taunted them, showing them horrors. Suddenly, the Archdemon vanished.

The Tevinter Warden-Commander, Ennius Elagabalus, struggled out of the Fade. If the Archdemon was not in the Fade at the moment, it meant it was awake...

The shouts of alarm were not particularly composed. Some of the shouts were closer to screams, when a horned head of nightmare and lunacy rose up over the wall and glared down at them.

Wildauer was looking through his spyglass at the moment, and the head, thus magnified, was frighteningly large. He yelped and dropped the instrument. Seen with-

out the lens, the Archdemon still looked big. And angry.

"Archers!" he cried out. "Mages!"

In a quick, dazed moment, every Warden was standing, weapon out and ready. A few groped for their canteens. Others found flasks of something stronger to drink. A defiant Rivainni behind a mantlet loosed an arrow. It soared up, past the burning scaffolding, and hit the Archdemon's armored neck. It penetrated only a little, and looked like no more than a dangling splinter compared to that vast, scaly body. The Archdemon did not appear to notice the challenge.

Pentaghast pulled himself to together with an effort. "So that's the Archdemon," he said, trying to sound casual. "Ugly bastard."

Elagabalus, pushing his way to the front, came to halt next to him, and shot him a cool look. Pentaghast wondered if the Tevinters disapproved of mocking Old Gods. Pentaghast had never heard anything about them that was worthy of respect. Fear... yes. Not respect.

Wings unfurled and beat the air like thunder. The Archdemon launched itself into flight, the dark purple of its hide blending into the smoky haze and the thickly clouded sky. Everyone braced for what was to come.

But instead of attacking, the Archdemon continued to climb. Higher and higher it rose, and the First Warden hastily snatched up his fallen spyglass to follow its trajectory. The dragon grew smaller and smaller in the distance, and finally was lost to sight. There was a long silence, and then excited whispering,

and then loud talking. The wait stretched out endlessly.

"Could it have risen above the clouds?" Pentaghast muttered. He glanced at Elagabalus.

"Why not?" the Tevinter replied, clearly concerned. "We know that griffons could fly that high. In fact —"

A massive body burst out of the clouds directly over their heads, and dropped like a firebomb among the Wardens.

Ten Wardens were dead before they understood they were in danger. Everyone was formed up in ranks for battle, closely packed. The Archdemon pounced again and again, wings beating like bellying sails, crushing a dozen at a time. It flapped up, and there was a sucking, wheezing intake while the Archdemon filled its lungs. Then hot blue flames roared out, turning men and women into torches.

The flames just missed the First Warden. He was fumbling for his dropped spyglass, looking at the ground, and the Second Warden and the men around him were clumps of cinders between one breath and another. He stood, frozen in shock, gaping at the monster smashing his army.

Some kept their heads better. Elagabalus got off a freezing curse that actually slowed the Archdemon. The wings faltered, and the dragon landed hard on the bloody field, crushing the life from already wounded Wardens.

On the other hand, it briefly made it vulnerable to edged weapons.

"To me!" Pentaghast shouted, charging. "To me! Keep it down!"



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Where were the net teams? If they could launch a weighted net now, they could entangle the Archdemon. If they could just disable the wings...

He plunged his sword into the huge thorax, trying to remember everything he had ever learned about dragon anatomy. The fire glands were above the stomach and within the lungs. If you could nick the fire glands, the corrosive chemicals would seep into the lungs, and...

A shock, and he and the others were knocked aside by the sweep of the tail. More Tevinters ran up, trying to coordinate their spells, so that one did not cancel another. The dragon screamed and grabbed a mage in fanged jaws, shaking her like a terrier shakes a rat, then throwing the bloody remnants aside.

Pentaghast rolled aside, narrowly avoiding a front talon, and scrambled to his feet. There was something wrong with the creature. It turned its head from side to side, trying to focus on its attackers. One great eye was white with Taint. The Archdemon turned its head toward him, and Pentaghast saw that the other eyesocket was empty, surrounded by half-healed scars.

"It's blind on the left!" Pentaghast roared, heartened by the discovery. "Attack on the left side! It can't see you!"

Who had done that? Someone had hurt the Archdemon, and made a good job of it. That wound had never been inflicted tonight. It was at least some days old. Had Bronwyn Cousland and her people done it? Had they already



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come to Val Royeaux and been wiped out? Were they nearby... perhaps on the other side of the city?

No way to tell at the moment. Hearing his words, mages and warriors alike grinned fiercely, dancing out of the dragon's way, trying to stay on its blind side.

All but the brave souls who deliberately put themselves in harm's way.

Athis and Borthos were running, shouting insults, banging swords on shields. Another blast of blue fire, and they ducked down behind the mantlets, temporarily safe from the flames.

The Tevinters gave a great shout in Arcanum, and a glowing band constricted around the dragon, squeezing it like an Iron Maiden. The Archdemon shrieked and backwinged, knocking Wardens aside like leaves in the wind. The spell faded and instantly the dragon was aloft, sucking in air.

"Scatter!" shouted Pentaghast. He saw the First Warden, not a dragon's length away, gaping stupidly. Running with the speed of a guilty boy caught stealing apples, Pentaghast rushed at him, and pushed him down. The flames raged over their heads. Pentaghast felt the hairs on the back of his neck crisp with heat.

A shriek of agony, cut off abruptly, as the Archdemon's jaws snapped shut on another victim.

Three ballistae traveled with them, each with missiles that would carry weighted nets. The teams manning them pushed them hard over the uneven ground, trying to find

a way to get a good shot at the Archdemon.

The Wardens were making an impact, here on the ground. The Tevinter mages still had enough power for another crushing prison curse, and while the Archdemon was caught in it, enterprising Wardens leaped up on their enemy, hacking, hacking. Athis tried to slash through the sail of one furled wing. The curse faded, and the Archdemon shook them off with an ear-splitting shriek. Its wing was hurt, but not disabled, and it rose up, gaining altitude, squealing as arrows and spells struck home. It veered and flamed down at them.

Some caught in the blast hid behind shields, some dove behind the mantlets, some rolled away. A few were caught and roasted in their armor, like turtles in their shells. Away from the fire, archers and mages kept pouring arrows and spells at the Archdemon. Outraged, it squawked and flew higher, out of range of the Wardens, but also out of range to flame them. Instead, a mob of darkspawn burst from the city and came charging across the plain. The Wardens hardly had time to form ranks, when the first wave was on them.

This was brutal. Overhead, the Archdemon seemed to be directing its forces, observing everything from its aerial vantage. The tired mages downed more lyrium. The penetrating odor began to have an effect even on the most non-magical of the warriors. Those who had learned the secret arts of the Templars used them more easily: Emissaries were struck down and destroyed. Another great storm was raised in the path of the charging darkspawn, killing

and crippling them. Some of the Tevinters decided the time had come for mightier magics, and drew the small, sharp lancets they kept on their belts. If they were to live through this, it was time to perform Blood Magic. Darkspawn staggered and fell, their blood boiling in their veins.

Behind them, the Archdemon tried to flame them again, dropping down and coming in low. Garamis, a tall Nevarran, hit the ballistae release, and a net shot up, its weights swinging in deadly circles, its furious momentum making one weight slam hard against the Archdemon's right front leg. For a moment, the dragon faltered, both front legs tangled in the net. Trying to free itself was a distraction from flight, and dragons were not built to hover. Elagabalus and the Wardens nearest him united in a Blood Magic spell that was powerful enough to disorient the Archdemon. Deciding that it would be better to put some distance between itself and the Wardens, the dragon flapped frantically and headed back to the city wall, ripping at the net with its teeth. It had been wounded, and was displeased with the battle. Its creatures could fight it instead. It gave a mental command to one of its generals, and the huge hurlock pounded away, running to direct the fight against the Archdemon's enemies.

Once the net was torn away – and it was no easy task – the Archdemon took flight once more, and settled back on its preferred perch on top of the south tower of the Grand Cathedral. The north tower had been utterly destroyed, but much of the other remained. It even still contained

its bells, now silent since the slaughter of the holy brothers who had rung their changes. The delicate spiral staircase of silverite and bronze that led from the base of the tower to the very top was damaged, but usable, had there been anyone to use it. The Divine and her Court had once enjoyed the view from this tower. Other than the Archdemon, no darkspawn cared for such things.

Most of the Cathedral's roof had collapsed, but this one tower was still a comfortable eyrie. The Archdemon could peer over the edge of the tower, long neck craned forward, and gaze down through the gaping hole, down, down, to the despoiled sanctuary, and think complacently about the great nest established in the vaults and dungeons below, gestating the great horde that would overwhelm Thedas.

It watched the battle going on outside the Gate of the Moon to the north, fearing nothing. The flares of magic and the screams of the dying were a spectacle: something to be enjoyed at a safe distance. It was pointless and unnecessary to risk itself. Saturated, steeped in Taint as it was, it paid no attention to the hawk and the raven perched on a nearby battlement. After a time, the birds flew away to the southwest.

"A battle outside the walls of Val Royeaux?"

"A very great battle," Morrigan told Loghain. "And the Wardens were holding their own, though they were hard-pressed. The Archdemon briefly took part, but withdrew in a fit of temper. Some clever Warden had tangled the

creature's talons in a net, and the Archdemon was forced to pick it apart with its teeth. 'Twas most diverting."

"It may still be going on," Anders said, more concerned for the Wardens than Morrigan was. "A lot of Wardens, but a lot more darkspawn. We flew over the battlefield. There's a huge force of mages — probably Tevinter — there. They were in ranks, taking turns with mass area-of-effect spells. It was impressive."

"Where is the Archdemon now?" Bronwyn asked. "And did you see an evidence of the injury that the Qunaris mentioned?"

"Up on the remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral," Anders told her. "It likes the view, I guess, and the cathedral tower is the best place to keep an eye on what's going on. From what I could see, its left eye is damaged. I think," he added, "that there's a big nest below the Cathedral. I got a really strong sensation there, and when I looked through the hole in the roof, I saw those long tendrils. I flew closer, and smelled.. ." he paused, making a face.

Morrigan was not so squeamish. " ...Broodmother."

"Then that's where we need to be," said Bronwyn. "We've got to go now, while the horde's attention is fixed on the north."

"What about the city's defenses?" Loghain frowned, taking out his map of Val Royeaux. "The Gate of the Sun? Is it guarded?"

Anders shook his head. "It's wide open, just as it's likely been since the day the refugees fled."

Loghain idly scratched at the stubble on his jaw. It might be some time before he shaved again. "Good," he said. "Then our army will march right through it."

CHAPTER 23

IN THE
ARCHDEMON'S
CITY

HEY PREPARED TO SET OUT, CARRYING ONLY THE ESSENTIALS. Bronwyn noticed that Riordan was carrying more than his

weapons and rations.

"Riordan, what have you got there?" she asked. "Is that *rope*?"

"Your friends' report reminded me of that I too have read of that old trick used by dragon hunters," the Orlesian told her. "The Nevarrans used weighted nets to tangle the dragon's wings and feet. I have neither nets nor weights, but grappling hooks might do as well."

Bronwyn felt her face redden. Yes, Jowan and Carver had mentioned ropes, also, but she had focused on their talk of spears, thinking it impossible for any number of Wardens to hold down a High Dragon. A drake or young female, yes; but not even the golems could hold a High Dragon.

No, they could not hold it down, but they might damage or disable it. Bronwyn had only pictured dropping a net over a smaller dragon. Tangling up the *feet* of *any* dragon was a workable plan.

"What a good idea! Thanks!"

She sent some soldiers to fetch some coils of rope, and others to rout out the grappling hooks in the baggage wagons. They might need them anyhow, if the gates of Val Royeaux were shut. They had not been closed when Anders and Morrigan had flown to Val Royeaux, but the situation could have changed.

A hurried conference with her Wardens was probably superfluous, because everyone by now should know who was senior to whom. Still, while the Marchers got themselves in order, there was a moment for a private talk. Bronwyn mentioned the rope and hooks, and assigned people to carry them. She then gathered her most trusted people and told them what they needed to know in case of her death.

"The roster is with the rest of the Warden papers, back in our supply wagon. It's in the rosewood chest. Quite a bit of gold is there, too. Don't forget that everyone gets paid on Summerday. There's a copy of the roster in Jader, and I sent the newest names to Catriona. We need to send some mages to Avernus. Some others, too, to build up Soldier's Peak. After the Blight, we'll want to present the improved potion to the rest of the Wardens. I've been thinking about that. We owe it to Riordan and the others who've come to help us. *Don't* forget that the Archdemon's blood has to be preserved and distributed. I also think we should keep the Jader post going, since it's close to Orzammar. Consider one in the south in the old place near Ostagar. Not now, of

course, but some day, perhaps."

"Bronwyn," Leliana said sternly. "You're going to take care of all of this yourself."

"I certainly intend to," Bronwyn agreed, "but no one can predict the future. I can't even predict what's going to happen today, or in the next hour. I trust all of you to do your best for the Wardens."

Tara touched her arm. "Bronwyn, I know I speak for everyone when I tell you it's been an honor to fight by your side."

That, of course, triggered a round of hugs and kisses and the shedding of a few tears. Morrigan watched from a distance, grimacing, but also uncomfortably moved. She had never thought to have friends, but she actually liked some of these people. Yes, Bronwyn was her friend — even something like a sister — and she was pleased with herself that she had done her part to keep her safe, even though Bronwyn must never know. With a determined sniff, she walked away, busying herself with the last details of preparation. She and Anders had been told to scout ahead as the army marched, and all their belongings must be in order for Bustrum and Ostap, who had agreed to carry them.

After the farewells, Anders found a moment to whisper a word in Tara's ear. At the moment, she seemed his only hope of retrieving something from last night's fiasco.

"What is it, Anders?" she asked. "You're supposed to be scouting."

"I know. It's just..." He made a face, feeling inexpressibly fool-

ish. "You know what we talked about? You know that thing...?"

She stared at him, and then understood.

"You idiot. What did she do — show you her boobies and you went simple-minded?"

"Something like that."

She hit him in the stomach with her tiny elven fist. Hard.

"You are such a tool!"

"Ow! Don't! Morrigan's coming back! She'll see us talking!"

"I'd like to give her a piece of my mind — "

"You promised not to tell!"

"You're a dithering imbecile. Is she already up the spout?"

"She thinks she is. Sorry."

He did not look nearly sorry enough, in Tara's opinion. He was trying to hide how pleased with himself he really was... how happy he and Morrigan were going to have a baby — even if the baby was an ancient malignant deity that would probably be worse than the Blight itself. Tara gave up all hope of getting him to do anything sensible. At least he had had the decency to warn her... no doubt hoping that someone else would take care of his problem for him.

She gave him a hard shove and stalked away, fuming. Right. That was Anders. She'd have to think of something herself. And she was going to discuss it with Jowan. So there.

First, of course, she passed on the story to Zevran, who laughed at Anders' utter inability to resist temptation, but then grew very serious.

"I agree with you, my Warden. It would be a supremely

dangerous thing for Morrigan to create another little Morrigan, but far more powerful. Perhaps she, like our dear and unfortunate Bronwyn, will lose this child. A sad thing, but safer for the world."

"We'd have to be very careful. Morrigan would kill anyone she thought had done it, and I'm not exaggerating for a minute."

"I know you are not, *mia bella*. A quiet dose, perhaps when Anders is away. It shall be done."

"I'll pick Jowan's brain for this, too. He might have some good ideas."

Zevran was quite convinced that the birth of an Old God into the world would be a catastrophe. Personally, he would let Tara busy herself with potions and hexes. There was a simpler, more final solution to Morrigan's plots, and Zevran was quite prepared to put it into action, if all else failed. Morrigan was Tara's friend — in her casual, superior fashion — but she was not *his* friend, and he would not shed a tear if she perished. Surely the Old God could not survive the death of its host. There would be no Taint to lure it to safety.

"My friends, my brothers and sisters, my comrades from the cold lands of the Korcari Wilds to the flower-scented cities of the Amaranthine coast! *This* is what Thedas can achieve, when we see our goal clearly! *This* is the best of what we are! You and I have seen the world as it really is, and we know our true enemy. The darkspawn know no borders.

The darkspawn know no race or title. In coming together, we have struck a blow for a better world, for mutual respect and greatness of spirit. Those who come after will envy us, they will remember our names, and they will fall silent when any speaks who stood with us today!"

Bronwyn knew how to pitch her voice to carry, and more than one mage in the crowd helped her discreetly with magic. Even those too far away to distinguish her words saw the tall figure in red armor: the hands stretched out as if in blessing, the bright eyes uplifted. The image remained with many, and the memory grew in the telling.

Her brief words over, Bronwyn sounded her horn, and the allies moved out once more, their numbers now increased by the Marchers. Loghain quickly revised his plans to include them, and was glad of the reinforcements. The more Wardens between Bronwyn and the Archdeamon, the happier he would be.

There were darkspawn to be met on the way, but they were scattered, and dealt with summarily. Only Niall and Velanna were in wyvern form, and they carried the rest of the harness for the others. Also in the vanguard were the golems, tirelessly clearing the road, invulnerable to missile weapons. Out on the left flank, behind a band of Orlesian Wardens, Prosper de Montfort was mounted on Leopold. The wyvern was restive and fidgety, curious about the smell of the darkspawn, but also curious about the other wyverns. The scent of the male was infuriating,

and Leopold longed to destroy it as an insupportable rival. The female, however...

The new mages chattered excitedly about the rumor that the Fereldans knew the lost art of shape-shifting. Speculation was rife about what the Chantry at home would do if it learned that mages could hide in the form of animals.

"I don't know what would be better," one girl said. "To be a cat so I could hide, or a giant bear – or a wyvern – so I could fight anyone who hunted me."

Another said, "I'd rather be a bird and fly away. I heard that they can turn into birds. Imagine the Templars trying to deal with that!"

In fact, at that very moment Anders and Morrigan had flown on ahead, watching for traps and ambushes. They called out in harsh bird voices, signaling their finds.

The Greenway became a coastal road here, and they could almost always see the Waking Sea, with Isabela's little fleet within view. Unfortunately, the refugees had fled that way, and many had not escaped the darkspawn. Heads on stakes were seen far more frequently than milestones.

They passed the ruins of a little wayside inn, where sadly decayed landlords and guests alike were strung up on the beams outside. A coastal manor at some distance from the main road looked untouched, until the Marchers went to investigate and found the horrors within. Luckily, the women had been killed, and not captured.

"Unless the survivors were taken elsewhere," Sainsby

grunted. He had gone on many missions to the Deep Roads, but he had never seen surface dwellings – human homes – despoiled by the darkspawn. It was hideous and disturbing. The manor was set alight, as the inn had been, to give a kind of funeral to the poor victims.

They had had a late start, but they were moving fast, unencumbered by the wagons, which were far behind and protected by the rear guard. Human soldiers hauled the light ballistae along, and dwarves hauled a wagon carrying the components for lyrium bombs. No one had more than he or she could carry comfortably. Aside from their usual weapons, Bronwyn and each of her Wardens carried one of Master Wade's dragonhunting spears, along with a spring-loaded anchor and its straps. If they managed to climb up on the Archdemon, it would not easily shake them loose. Luckily, there were enough of the spears and the anchors to distribute them to some of the others: Riordan, Visconti, and Sainsby, of course, and as many of their people as possible.

Astrid, walking beside Riordan, fell into conversation with him. They talked about the new weapons, and Astrid introduced him to Shale. He had seen the golem, of course, but had not quite grasped that Shale was fully sentient, and not subordinate to any control rod. He was also interested to learn about how golems had been created, and was told Astrid's speculations on Shale's origins.

"So you remember nothing of your former life?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," Shale rumbled. "Of course, when one

has lived for many ages – far beyond the span of mere squishy creatures such as yourself – it all gets rather fuzzy. I do not remember all of my existence as a golem, for that matter, though that is due to much of it being so boring. Why bother to remember ages of standing immobile in the Deep Roads? I cannot complain of boredom recently, however. The darkspawn are an evil that must be eradicated.”

Riordan was pleased at the golem’s very proper sentiments. Astrid took the opportunity to raise a proposal she had not mentioned to Bronwyn.

“What would you say to a Warden post being established within Orzammar itself?”

Riordan instantly saw the advantage of that. “It would be a matter for the First Warden to approve, but I cannot see him refusing. I’ve often thought that Wardens should do more to take the battle to the enemy.” He bit his lip, and tried to explain things he had not liked to say aloud in the past, not meaning to seem disloyal. “The lore indicates that there are millions and millions of darkspawn in the Deep Roads – so many that it would be futile to fight them there in strength – but I am beginning to wonder if that is mistaken. Supposedly the Archdemon brings the darkspawn onto the surface *en masse*, and we have not seen millions of them here – thank the Maker! Perhaps the past estimates have been exaggerated. Perhaps we could undertake a long-term plan to seek out nests and destroy them.”

“We can move from reclaimed thaig to thaig,” Astrid

agreed, eyes gleaming. “We’ve already cleared the Amgar-rak Road and installed new barrier doors. We’ve explored widely – or at least Bronwyn has – below Orlais. I think we could change the nature of the struggle with more emphasis on hunting the darkspawn down. Of course,” she said carelessly, “once the Archdemon is dead, the surface will suffer through the Thaw, and that will take some resources, but it’s foolish and short-sighted to let the darkspawn build up below. As Paragon, I’ll have the power to establish the Wardens in the dwarven kingdom. I think it’s time.”

“You will have my complete support,” Riordan assured her.

Meanwhile, Tara discussed pregnancy issues with a blushing Jowan, who was under the mistaken impression that she was talking about herself.

“Don’t give up hope, Tara,” he urged her, earnestly concerned. “I know fighting darkspawn is important, but you should have a life, too.”

“It’s just...” she sighed, and then twisted the knife a little more. “You heard how the Wardens made Fiona give up Alistair when he was a baby. He ended up living in a stable, raised as a servant. It’s marked him: anyone can see. I couldn’t bear for a child of mine to be treated like that! And it would be worse, because he’d be an elf!”

“Bronwyn would never do that to you! How can you imagine that?”

She whispered, “And what if Bronwyn doesn’t survive?”

“Don’t talk like that!”

"Well, what if she doesn't? The First Warden might appoint some hardass stranger who toes the Weisshaupt line. He'd make me give up the baby or be sent back to the Circle." She declared, with absolutely sincerity, "I really would rather die than ever set foot in a Circle again. So listen, there's something, isn't there? Something that nobody would notice? I don't want to hurt Zevran, but it's my decision."

"Of course it is," Jowan said, rather upset. "But it's apples and oranges. You've got Zevran. I can't imagine him leaving you in the lurch with a baby. If he had to, he'd stay home and take care of it."

She raised a brow, and he understood her. What if Zevran didn't make it?

"All right," he said, not wanting her to worry about it. "I could make something for you, but you'd need to take it early on. It would look like a completely natural miscarriage and doesn't leave traces. Just get through this battle today, and think about it, for Maker's sake! You have friends, Tara. You've got me, for that matter. I know I let you down before, but I swear I'll never forsake you again as long as I live!"

She grinned, remembering the story, and punched his arm.

They saw the towers of Val Royeaux before mid-afternoon.

They were obviously not as Bronwyn had imagined them, nor as she had seen them pictured in her history books. The distinctive twin towers of the Grand Cathedral had been reduced to one, and that one a shadow of its former glory.

On another hill, a little closer, was the Palace Compound, smoke rising from shattered domes. High above all should be the White Spire, the home of the Circle of Mages. In its place was a broken stump. It looked as if the tower had imploded, collapsing in on itself.

Loghain did not allow anyone else to know what he was feeling. The sight was unreal, fantastic. The last thing in life he had ever expected as to look upon the Grand Cathedral with his own eyes. It was hard not to be distracted by the ruby flame of spiteful triumph, seeing the capital of the enemies of his blood laid low. Bronwyn had grieved for the loss of innocent life. Yes, no doubt many of the dead had been innocent. Others, however, had been bitter, cunning foes, and some of them had been the very people he had fought at River Dane thirty years before. Had they not died, they would still be plotting the ruin and enslavement of Ferelden, and yet more assassination attempts on Bronwyn and himself.

Bastards. Let them rot.

The sky, already overcast, grew darker. A distant thunder rumbled from the grey clouds.

"Wonderful," Bronwyn muttered. "All we need now is rain." She turned to the other Wardens. "The city isn't looking its best, is it?"

The older Wardens exchanged glances, almost smiling. Here their long exposure to Taint was going to be of genuine use. Once they got closer, they should not only be able to sense darkspawn, but how many and what kind.



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They should be able to give the locations of the leaders and above all, of the Archdemon.

Or perhaps that would not be necessary. The remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral looked... odd. Loghain scowled at it, and peered through his spyglass.


A small, angular bit at the top broke off, and resolved into a dragon. The creature flew north and veered lazily, neck extended down as if to watch what was going on below.

Loghain, carefully expressionless, handed the spyglass to Bronwyn. She studied the distant Archdemon. Here they were at last, and she tried to analyze what she felt. Relief? Fear? Anticipation? All of those, she suppose, and many other things as well.

"If it's interested in what's going on there," she said, "I would guess that at least some of the other Wardens are still alive and keeping it busy."

"Good of them," Loghain remarked, not caring a copper about any of them. It was convenient for his own army, and might indeed save many lives. "Let's get moving and enter the city before it notices us."

They marched on, guided by the tiny black dragon-shaped shadow in the sky, as it circled over the ruined city.



Loghain's final orders were written during the last halt. An aide held a flat board before him by way of a desk, while Loghain scribbled quickly. The map of Val Royeaux was vivid in his head: a brightly colored map marked with



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strategic objectives, possible ambush sites, and the quickest routes. Duke Prosper, ready to offer condescending, expert advice, was absolutely stunned by the man's grasp of a place he had never visited, and once again granted that the Fereldan had extraordinary ability.

Targeting defensible districts and then securing them with a house-to-house search was the safest, most reliable way to take a city, but those tactics were unsuited to this unique situation. The Wardens were right: the Archdemon was what mattered. Like the king in chess, its destruction would win the war. They could slaughter darkspawn until they themselves rotted from Taint: it would avail them nothing unless the Archdemon were slain.

They had to get in and get to the Archdemon as quickly as possible. Or more properly, the Wardens had to get to the Archdemon as quickly as possible. The role of the rest of the army, as Loghain saw it, was to protect the Wardens and keep them from being overwhelmed by the horde before they could accomplish their mission.

Sten presented himself before Bronwyn and Loghain as these arrangements were being made.

"The Tome of Koslun is said to be in the Grand Cathedral. I wish to go there with my men."

Bronwyn saw no problem with that. "That's where I'm going, most likely. I'll have to follow the Archdemon, but it seems to like the Grand Cathedral as well as anywhere else. It's possible that the darkspawn have made a nest there."

He nodded. "Broodmothers. We have fought such a creature together, you and I. It would be a worthy deed to remove them from the world. Yes, I think a nest is likely, based on what Tallis told Karasten. Coming from the docks, she said she saw almost no darkspawn. However, there were a great number in the walled compound of the Cathedral. She described tendrils and spongy matter that sounds exactly like what we saw in the Dead Trenches. There may be other nests as well, of course, but the Grand Cathedral is certainly the site of one."

"Then I think you and your men should attach yourselves to my party of Wardens," said Bronwyn. "While they must not attempt to kill the Archdemon, we could be of significant help to each other. Astrid is leading the team that will try to destroy the Broodmothers, largely with lyrium bombs. We can't expect they will be completely successful, so a party will have to go in and mop up afterwards. Do you have any idea where in the Cathedral the book is being kept?"

"I do not. *'Somewhere in the vaults,'* was our only intelligence on the matter."

Bronwyn shrugged. "No doubts the vaults are extensive, but they're not the Deep Roads. And you won't have to worry about being discreet or nondestructive. Once you get to the Grand Cathedral, I would appreciate any help you can give Astrid and her people, but of course you'll want to find your relic. Good luck to you."

"I accept the sentiment in the spirit in which it is offered,"

Sten said gravely. "Though it is not luck that will save us, but courage and skill at arms."

Certain other objectives would have to be determined at the very last moment: The Wardens could detect darkspawn concentrations, but not until they were much closer. Once at the city gates, they would have a far clearer picture of the horde's distribution within the city. Speed was of the essence now. They must get to the city before the Archdemon could fortify the Gate of the Sun against them.

The troops were ordered to march at the double with a minimum of noise and no cheering. The point was not to rally opposition. They moved quickly, across the plain, and then down into the valley of the River Royeaux. Armor and weapons clattered and banged; the golems shook the ground. Thousands of troops simply moving made noise enough. They could only hope that whatever was happening on the other side of the city was noisier yet.

Spanning the River Royeaux was another stone bridge, occupied by darkspawn. The creatures squawked at the appearance of the army spilling over the hill, but had neither the sense to flee or to send for reinforcements. Archers shot into them on the run, while mages cursed them motionless. A darkspawn emissary hurled a sickly green spell their way and was frozen and shattered. At that sight, it was not possible for the troops to be quite mute: a grim chuckle greeted the sight, and some muttered approval.



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The road curved, following the area's natural geography. The Greenway fed into the Imperial Highway, which stretched out, straight and majestic, before the shining Gate of the Sun, not yet defaced by the darkspawn, not totally sullied by the Taint. Overhead, a hawk and a raven wheeled and fluttered. Thunder rolled out again, and a few drops began coming down.

Bronwyn could not help but admire the imposing entry. Cast in bronze and thickly gilded, the relief of Drakon Kordilius, first Emperor of Orlais, proudly declared his heroic deeds. A great golden sun, the symbol of Andraste, rose high above all. It was simply glorious. No wonder Orlesians were so overbearing. Loghain snorted at the opulence. and waved Riordan and Visconti over to join them. Sainsby arrived a few moments later.

"Do you sense anything yet?"

Bronwyn huffed a grim laugh. "Lots of darkspawn!"

The three older men could be far more precise, and could tell him where the darkspawn were concentrated. They could also tell him about some secondary targets. There were powerful darkspawn Generals in the Market District and at the Palace. Probably another at the Alienage, though that was closer to the docks, and it was hard to distinguish it clearly, considering the intense sensation coming from the Cathedral. Loghain nodded, and instantly refined his strategy. Anders and Morrigan flew back to report, and Loghain refined it some more. The



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army caught its breath, and prepared for battle. Wyverns took shape, and were harnessed. Bronwyn smiled at Morrigan, and went to mount up. Scout trotted beside her, looking back at Loghain and Amber.

"Bronwyn!" Loghain called. She turned, and was surprised at the look on his face.

Ah. So he feels something, after all.

Perhaps she did, too, even after all that had passed. Certainly not that breathless, blushing adoration that had shadowed the past few years and relegated her to Highever like a foolish girl too immature to be out in society. But something. He was her first and only love, and he had not ceased to be a great man in her eyes. A difficult, irascible, and unaffectionate man, but still a very great one.

She smiled at him. "Luck in battle."

He did not smile back, but strode toward her. She was startled when he grasped her arm and pulled her firmly to him.

"You're a brave and clever girl... and I love you." He took a deep breath. "Now don't do anything *stupid*."

The rough kiss was brief but hungry. It kept Bronwyn from laughing out loud at Loghain's concept of tender words. They were just so utterly... Loghain.

For his part, Loghain bitterly regretted not taking the time to make love to her properly that morning. Here they were, facing the Archdemon, and anything might happen to either of them. So many times he had failed to make a proper goodbye, and those he had loved had slipped away

forever, not knowing what was in his heart: his mother, his father, Rowan, Celia, Maric... yes, even Cailan. Bronwyn must understand that he did not take her for granted.

The Fereldans looked on with delight and approval; the dwarves and elves with amusement; the Antivans and Marchers with interest; the Orlesians with faint horror and disgust. There were not many of them who did not think Queen Bronwyn far too good for Loghain Mac Tir. Not only was she a high-born lady, and he a bloody-handed peasant, she was Andraste's Champion, and specially favored by the Maker. A number of them, like Prosper de Montfort, Prince Florestan, and Boniface Clery, were not sure that it was appropriate for her to have relations with any *man*. Riordan and his Wardens, however, were far more tolerant.

"It's going to be all right," Bronwyn whispered to Loghain, looking up at him with a faint, arch smile. "I promise not to be stupid. We'll see each other again."

"I'll hold you to that."

Morrigan was ready and impatiently waiting. Loghain gave Bronwyn a boost onto the wyvern's back, and she and the rest of the chosen few were soon mounted and buckled in securely.

The army would punch through to the Cathedral, using the Avenue of the Sun. Units of the Fereldan and Orlesian forces, along with the Antivan Wardens, would travel down the streets running parallel to the main thoroughfare, since trying to travel on a single street, however wide, would create

a bottleneck, and leave them only a narrow front rank with which to attack the enemy. Then too, they would better be able to protect the Wardens from flank attacks that way.

As to the secondary targets: the Marchers, supported by a unit of Legion of the Dead, would deal with the General in the Imperial Market. The Antivans and the Dalish would eventually deal with the Alienage. Duke Prosper was eager to go to the Palace.

"I know it better than anyone," he declared.

Loghain shrugged. The Orlesian's motives were perfectly clear to him, but if the fellow wanted to go there, Loghain did not much care. That wyvern of his was restless and likely to cause trouble, and it was best to get it away from the others.

"If you like," he said. "You are entirely welcome to the Palace. The Archdemon is what matters."

The Gate of the Sun was not simply a door into Val Royeaux: it represented a large and complex triple gate defense system. Denerim's Great Gate was a smaller, less sophisticated version, but knowing it gave them some idea of what to expect. There was no organized defense of the place, but it was still full of darkspawn.

It was decorated with darkspawn victims, hanging here and there like spoiled fruit. Some lucky survivors had escaped through the Gate of the Sun and fled to Vercheil or Val Foret. The slower, the older, the infirm, the hesitant — they had not fared so well, and had been slaughtered in great numbers.



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None of the Wardens missed that fact that there were not many women of childbearing age among the victims here.

But darkspawn had died too. The Orlesian gate guards had put up quite a fight, and there were heaps of hurlocks and genlocks scattered about, each centering around one or two brave souls who had died hard. For that matter, they found some dead ogres, surrounded by human soldiers who had given their lives to cover the flight of the escaping civilians.

After a month, it was all putrescence and rot. The stink was vile, penetrating the very stones underfoot. Carrion birds had attempted to feed off the dead, and had perished from Taint. It explained why the skies even before Val Charente had been so silent and empty. Not even rats could live long, though a few burst out from the rubble; Tainted and crazed and rabid. Dalish scouts watched for them with bows at the ready and arrows nocked.

It took time to clear out the Gate, for there were gatehouses and guard towers where darkspawn lurked. The Wardens and the rest of the army spread out quickly, however, and were able to put overwhelming force to bear on this enclosed, discrete area. A hard fight, but a worthwhile one. The golems shook the earth under the darkspawn's feet, sending them sprawling. The wyverns dashed about with terrible speed, knocking barricades asunder, crushing darkspawn, carrying their riders faster than a man could run. Bombs and grenades rained down, and the darkspawn were destroyed before they clearly understood their danger.



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Loghain, careful to wipe his face and hands clear of blood using a clean cloth that he then discarded, gave the various units their orders. It was time to make their way into the city proper. The army marched through the inner gate and divided into Loghain's planned parallel columns, moving quickly toward their objectives.

First Enchanter Irving was tasked with standing with the Wardens and directing the mages. Most of their most experienced mages would be fighting as wyverns, and many of their newest recruits were apostates: half-trained at best. The mages from the Fereldan Circle were used to following Irving's direction, and his presence would hearten them. Knight-Commander Greagoir and his Templars, however, was ordered to help support the left flank, with dwarves, Fereldan soldiers, and the Antivan Wardens. The two old men shook hands gravely, and parted ways.

The Marchers broke off and headed to the Imperial Market. A little later, a large force of Orlesian chevaliers under Duke Prosper, and supported by a dozen Orlesian Wardens led by Clovis, turned at the Imperial Way, toward the Palace. In the parallel columns, the Antivans were spread out on the fringes, on the watch for darkspawn attack. The main body continued up the Avenue of the Sun and the streets alongside it, keeping the remaining tower of the Grand Cathedral before them as their lodestone.

Ahead, the broad avenue opened out into a spacious, elegant square.



THE GRAND CATHEDRAL



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"Place Reville," Loghain muttered, remembering his map. The square was old, but had been renamed after Mad Emperor Reville, the bastard who had ordered the invasion of Ferelden. It must have been quite the place before the darkspawn redecorated. The flowers in the long marble planters were dead, and the statues looking down on the square had been vandalized and reinvented as darkspawn idols. Strange arcs of metal were strapped each to famous Orlesian's back, reminiscent of grotesque wings.

Overhead, they heard a outraged bellow. The Archdemon had noticed them at last.

Off and on, the northern Wardens had been fighting for an entire day.

That did not mean that individual men and women had fought that long. That was impossible, even for Wardens with their Taint-fueled strength and stamina. The warriors and mages took turns, the healers repaired the damage, food was brought up from the baggage train – hidden in a ravine – and gobbled. Wardens collapsed behind the lines and slept fitfully for an hour or two, and then struggled up to face the enemy again.

The First Warden had somewhat pulled himself together, and now busied himself with logistics. He was good at numbers, at administration, at making things work. That had always been his strength... well, that and his ability to play Weisshaupt politics. The latter ability meant noth-

ing at the moment; the former ability was vital. He was not a coward, but he was not a great tactician or strategist. He must leave that to others – mostly to his newly-appointed Second Warden and to Pentaghast and Elagabalus.

"We're bleeding the darkspawn, Commander," Athis murmured to Pentaghast, shaking him awake. "We're bleeding them good. Look what the robes have done!"

Pentaghast grimaced, but did not rebuke her for using that derogatory term for mages. The Nevarran mages called themselves that, after all. Besides, he was too startled at the sight before him to pay much attention to anything else.

Powered by Blood Magic, the Tevinters had changed the very shape of the battlefield. Instead of the flat, grey-brown plain, stretching to the walls of Val Royeaux, Pentaghast saw a defensive maze of swells and hollows.

This was terrifying, overwhelming magic, and it frightened the other Wardens as much as it encouraged and shielded them.

Mages swayed from lyrium, and some turned aside and vomited where they stood from the effort, but when they united their magic, the very earth cracked wide; the Wardens were lifted onto rising ground, and ditches and pits appeared to trap and confound the darkspawn.

Breastworks swelled up to defend the ballistae and the Wardens who operated them. The shields were tilted up to provide protection, since the Archdemon now and then attempted an attack from above. It was wary of them now,

and did not wish to risk further injury to itself. It also was sending out fewer darkspawn to challenge them, for the creatures were unable to close with the Wardens, or even inflict serious damage on them.

"It's a delaying tactic," Pentaghost muttered. "It wants to keep us out of Val Royeaux and wait for its reinforcements to spawn."

"And it has the walls of Val Royeaux to keep us out," agreed Athis. "If we try to storm the city, we'll be massacred."

"Possibly. Possibly not. I think that given time, our Tevinter friends could collapse the walls. We'll have to attack sooner or later. If we can just get some rest, we'll have a better chance." He stared at the distant figure of the Archdemon, gliding through the sullen skies, wishing he could strike it dead with the hatred he felt.

As he watched, the Archdemon veered sharply, bellowing a challenge. It flew away toward the south, and the horde before them was suddenly leaderless and bereft of will.

There was not a moment to lose.

"To the Gate!" roared Pentaghost. "Follow me!"



"There it is!" Bronwyn shouted, pointed straight ahead. "Ballistae! Mages! Archers! Make ready!" Like the rest of the Wardens mounted on the wyverns, she jumped to the ground. Riding the wyverns had been a good vantage as they slaughtered darkspawn on the way, but the wyverns could fight the Archdemon best if they were unhindered by Wardens and saddle harness. Teams dashed forward, previously assigned

to each wyvern, quickly unbuckling the straps.

The Archdemon visibly started, its head swerving about to see the unsuspected threat in the city it had claimed. Then it seemed to pause in a moment of indecision, before changing direction. It headed their way, screaming, preparing to flame and rend.

Bronwyn had seen this before. It was just like the false Andraste in the Frostbacks, who had killed Cullen and nearly killed the rest of them, too. She briefly felt a shiver of the same terror she had experienced then.

Today, however, she faced a dragon not with a mere handful of brave souls, but with an entire host of heroes; with advanced weapons and bombs and clever tactics. They had killed Flemeth, the mighty shapechanger and Witch of the Wilds, with a far smaller force. Bronwyn was absolutely certain they could kill this creature, who was clearly relying on its size and strength.

But it would not be easy. At the same moment, the right flank was set upon by a sudden rush of darkspawn, led by a pair of ogres. Loghain and his soldiers would have to deal with that, while the Wardens in the center dealt with the Archdemon.

"Sten! Support Loghain!" Bronwyn ordered. The Qunari, like a battering ram, dashed to the Fereldan lines, and immediately engaged the darkspawn minions.

The Wardens withdrew to what shelter the buildings lining the street afforded, looking like terrified people running for their lives. It was not entirely a sham. Bron-

wyn hoped that it was a temptation the Archdemon was unable to resist. She sheathed her sword and dagger, and like the rest of her people, unslung her spear: razor-sharp, well-balanced, light but strong. Only the mages kept their staves, holding them on high, ready to cast. The wyverns hugged the walls, ready to leap on the Archdemon if it touched the ground. Had the Archdemon even seen them? Did it smell them? Did it know what they were?

The creature was nearly on them, neck stretched out at full length, wings folded in a graceful dive. Bronwyn shouted, "Loose!"

Curses, spells, arrows, and explosive bolts rose in a lethal fury. The Archdemon had never imagined that these puny creatures could actually resist it. The mages had been briefed to hit with united spells, thus not canceling each other out. The paralysis spell, combined with a misdirection hex, crippled and confused the Archdemon. Arrows glanced off its scales, but penetrated its nostrils and flew through its open maw. One struck it in its ruined eye, which did not blind it, of course, but pained it. Two of the ballistae bolts missed altogether, but one, envenomed, struck the creature full in the belly.

Still stiff from the fading paralysis, it hit the ground hard, driving the bolt in further. The Archdemon shrieked its outrage to heaven. In a moment, the wyverns bounded at it, coordinating their assault like a wolf pack around a bear.

A few arrows were loosed. "Wait!" Bronwyn shouted.

"You'll hit our own people!"

For the moment they must wait and see what damage six wyverns could do. Bronwyn called to her newest mages. "Do what you can, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else!"

Some hexes and curses, carefully targeted, got through. Area spells were out of the question. One paralysis glyph caught both the Archdemon, Jowan, and Niall in its grasp. The cleverer mages aimed at the Archdemon's head and wings, and slowed the creature somewhat. The rest was up to the wyverns.

Even in wyvern form, Tara was furious with Morrigan. She spat poison in the Archdemon's face, and then turned to snarl at Morrigan. Morrigan, taken aback at Tara's hostility, but assuming that it was a warning to be careful not to strike a killing blow, twisted away and clawed at a huge wing.

Ten times the size of any of the wyverns, the Archdemon lashed out with a massive tail. Anders was thrown through the air, and did not quite land on his feet. The injured wyvern lay winded for a moment, and then hesitantly rolled onto his belly, testing whether it dared move or not. Something was damaged, but Anders could not heal himself in this shape. Reluctantly, he shifted back into human form, and began repairing his broken leg and cracked ribs.

Jowan squealed, caught in a blast of arcane fire. Tara took advantage of the Archdemon's distraction to leap in from the left, blind side and bite the dragon's neck close to the head. The stream of fire broke off as the Archdemon shook its attacker off violently. Tara bounded away, over

the Archdemon's back, raking her talons in long streaks, ripping off scales. Jowan screamed again, dashing away, changing back to his human shape, trying to heal himself. The burn was excruciating. He had never felt pain like this.

Velanna leaped in to spit poison, and the dragon's front talon lashed at her with alarming speed, slashing open her side. The wyvern doubled back on herself, shocked at the wound, dashing away to Anders. The mage groaned with the effort of healing the long wound, and was only partly successful.

"You'll need to shift for it to work!" Anders called. Furious, impatient, the Dalish elf changed, and Anders made a better job of it. Instantly, she changed back, and charged the Archdemon, roaring. Anders swallowed a lyrium potion, and shot another healing spell at Jowan's burn.

Niall tried to scramble up the Archdemon's back, wanting to get at the wings. His fangs tore at the base of the right wing. Tainted blood bubbled up, and the Archdemon writhed with pain, trying to beat its attacker away. Niall bit at a tendon, feeling he was really doing damage, forgetting how long a dragon's neck was. The head snaked back, and huge jaws seized the wyvern, shaking Niall like a rat and then tossing him aside. Back in the ranks, Maeve uttered a wild shriek. She rushed out, Quinn at her heels, to drag Niall to safety, in the projecting corner between two building.

The wounded man had lost all control over his shape, and with bizarre contortions returned to human form.

His injuries were ghastly. Anders hobbled over to help him. They were down to three active wyverns, and the Archdemon was damaged, but might well kill them all. Bronwyn could not throw them away. Anders, Jowan, and Niall were all hurt. It was time to step in.

"That's enough!" she cried. "Back off, wyverns! Archers! Mages! Keep aiming at the head and wings! Come on, the rest of you! We're going in!"

She charged, spear at the ready, followed by the Warden melee fighters. They had all been organized roughly in groups of three: Alistair, Emrys, and Oghren worked together; another group united Brosca, Bustrum, and Ostap, and Bronwyn expected great things of them. There were a dozen groups altogether, and they almost immediately began doing serious damage. The dogs worked with the fighters: even Jowan's Lily, who had watched the wyvern fight, whimpering. Now she was loosed, with Scout and Magister, and they challenged the dragon, barking and dodging. Bronwyn had tried to make them understand that they must not get too close, but she was not sure she had succeeded.

Adaia and Siofranni dashed out, Siofranni throwing noise-making bombs in front of the Archdemon to keep it confused, Adaia shooting it in the face with the Airbow: jumping, skipping, calling insults. The girls were not doing much damage, but they were preventing the Archdemon from choosing a victim.

Zevran, Fenris, and Silas insisted on coming with them,

but they were armed with swords: their mission to protect Bronwyn and the other Wardens from darkspawn that broke past the army. The Wardens were too focused on dragon-killing to protect themselves.

Against the walls, Leliana commanded the archers and First Enchanter Irving the mages. It was a day of horror, but Irving was secretly pleased that all his years of study in an isolated tower on an island had at last actually proved good for something: he had a real talent for battlemagic.

With Bronwyn's charge, most of the wyverns, now decimated by the Archdemon, fell back into human shape. Tara raced over to help Jowan, who could barely walk; she supported him as they hurried to find Anders and Niall. Lily broke away and made a dash for her master, tail wagging anxiously. Velanna's blood was up, and she had become so invested in her wyvern form that she did not change, but hissed at the humans and then darted away, further down the avenue, looking for darkspawn to slay.

Morrigan, the most experienced of the shape-shifters, changed directly from wyvern to hawk, and fluttered up to a balcony above the fight. There she took human shape again. She was nearly invisible, safe from attack herself, and in a prime position to cast spells down on the Archdemon without hitting anyone else. It was quite the spectacle. She was almost mesmerized by it, watching the struggling little figures in armor, thrusting their spears into the massive, red-purple body.

Down below, Anders was trying to save Niall, despairing of accomplishing anything but easing his pain. Maeve clung to his hand, crying.

"I want you to have all my things, Maeve," Niall gasped out. "My trunk's in the baggage train. And take my belt pouch. There's a nice necklace in it I wanted to give you after all this was over. There's gold, too. Somebody's going to get it, and I'd rather it was you..."

"Oh, don't!" she sobbed.

"No... take it. Quinn..."

Quinn slipped it off and gave it to the distraught Maeve, while Anders worked feverishly.

Niall tried to smile, but it was a raw grimace of pain. "My mother always said... She said I was a mage for a reason. I hope I haven't disappointed her..."

Maeve could not speak. Anders said roughly, "I know she's very proud of you."

Tara and Jowan joined them a moment later, moving along the walls. Jowan's face was grey and drawn with agony. Tara cast the only weak healing spell she knew at him again and again. Jowan lowered himself to the pavement by Niall's twitching body, trying to rally his own mana.

There was nothing to be done. Niall's eyes were open, but life was already leaving them. He moaned, and called out "Mother?" very distinctly. And then he was dead.

Thunder pealed again. Lightning flashed dimly through the clouds. The storm drew closer. Maeve made a strange,

pained noise through her teeth, and ran back to the battle, clutching her spear. Quinn paused, uncertain, and muttered, "Sorry." Then he followed her.

The three Circle mages, who had known each longer than they had known anyone else in the world, huddled together, mourning. Soon, Lily came, unable to stay away from Jowan. She licked his face, pressing close, mourning with his friends.

Even without the undivided attention of the Archdemon, the Marcher Wardens and the Legion faced a very nasty fight in the Market. A half-dozen ogres charged them – fortunately not all together – and then they were confronted by a huge hurlock General, commanding a very large force. The value of the mages they had summoned from the Circles of the Free Marches was incalculable. All the same, twenty Wardens, eight mages, and fifteen dwarves died there, amidst the vandalized remains of the most exclusive shopping district in all Orlais. Everyone was distracted by the splendor of the goods left behind by the murdered artisans, and indulged in an orgy of looting, almost before the the last of the darkspawn there was slain. Wardens broke into a wine merchant's shop, and smashed the tops off the bottles, guzzling rare vintages until the wine ran like blood. Sainsby furiously called his people to order, occasionally using the flat of his sword.

"We'll have time for that later!" he snarled. "Clear out the rest of the darkspawn so we can join the others at the Cathedral."

All the same, quite a few packs were stuffed with silk gowns and silver spoons, gold was thrust into belt pouches, and diamond necklaces were slipped under breastplates and mages' robes. Following Loghain's instructions, they fought their way through a curving street that led through a residential area, and ultimately back to the Avenue of the Sun.

It was starting to rain. Barely more than a drizzle, it was still enough to make the stones beneath their boots slick and treacherous. Worse yet, the damp stirred up the stink of darkspawn, steaming from the cobblestones.

Darkspawn were everywhere: pouncing on them from derelict houses; shooting at them from upper windows. Every street intersection was a skirmish, and an open square was an invitation to a pitched battle. These interruptions slowed them and cost them lives, but did not stop their advance.

They paused, though, when they emerged from a narrow passage and saw what the Archdemon was doing in the Place Reville.

Glad he had escaped the confrontation with the Archdemon – he could hear the beast's screams and bellows all too clearly – Prosper led the way to the Palace. He had reasons of his own for focusing his attention there. Wardens had sensed a powerful darkspawn General in that direction and a significant darkspawn force. No one wanted that force to support the darkspawn near the Grand Cathedral. They needed to be destroyed where

they were. Prosper knew the area extremely well, perhaps better than anyone else in the army.

Mostly importantly, in Prosper's view, the Palace had vital symbolism in the war. The man who seized the Palace – however ravaged it was – was the man who would be viewed as the de facto Emperor. And then, it was full of riches beyond imagining, and secret archives that must not be scrutinized by foreigners. Prosper was fairly certain that the darkspawn had not broken into the treasure vaults: the doors were thick silverite, and the locks subtle. He happened to have the secret of them due to the clever work of an agent of his – who shortly met his end after reporting to Prosper, alas, thus making him unable to sell his information to anyone else.

The archive was in a secret room, *La Chambre des Rumeurs*. Prosper had been there many a time in his days of favor. Even finding the room would be beyond the capabilities of the darkspawn, nor would the contents of the room have any meaning for them or for the Archdemon. Here was decrypted diplomatic correspondence, here were the minutes of secret tribunals, here were the records of deeds done in darkness. Reports on the actual parentage of claimants to noble titles were kept here, along with the ponderings of the great spymasters of Orlais. Here one could discover how exactly the parents of the Imperial Princesses had met their end; here Prosper had learned that the death of Queen Rowan of Ferelden was not due to natural causes.

It would never do for Loghain Mac Tir to read about *that*.

It would be best if that the man never entered the Palace; or, if he must, it was essential that someone else have the Palace in proper order, with all its buttons buttoned, as it were, before he set foot in it.

He shouted at Leopold to slow down. They were making sufficient speed, and the streets were becoming slick under the light rain. Leopold, overjoyed to be out and running, wanted to race away and leave the foot soldiers behind. That would be imprudent. Prosper knew the creature might grow over-excited and indulge in acrobatics that might unseat his rider. For that reason. Prosper was strapped in place very securely, and his back and neck protected from whiplash by the high back of the saddle. The buckles could be released at need quite easily, but they would not slip without active triggering.

The wyvern, however, was making a splendid portable battering ram. Any barricades in the streets fell before his might. His chevaliers, running beside and behind him, mopped up the darkspawn that were left. Resistance had been light, with most of the darkspawn concentrated on the north side of the city.

A shout to his left revealed the presence of Prince Florestan, running along easily, hacking and slashing with great good will. He would not be a pebble in Prosper's boot for much longer. Further back in the ranks was a man who would deal with him once they were a little more dispersed and distracted.

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From the Avenue of the Sun to the Imperial Way, they swept along to the gates of the Palace Compound, now sadly Tainted and tarnished. No matter: anything worth the keeping could be cleansed by magic and transported to the new capital of the Empire.

Where would that be? Prosper knew he might have to temporarily relocate to Montsimnard, or to untouched Val Firmin, but surely not forever. Perhaps an entirely new capital would be required: a monument to his power and taste.

The gates were open. The darkspawn were imbeciles. Leopold burst into the Palace Courtyard, and Prosper discharged his magnificent one-handed crossbow in the faces of the enemy.

A fairly nasty fight ensued. A big hurlock burst out of the palace doors, and ran, slowly and ponderously, at the attackers. A storm of arrows feathered him, but did not stop his charge. The creature trampled resistance underfoot, swinging a huge axe in a frenzy. The Orlesian advance broke apart into small discreet bands. Leopold loosed a gout of green venom that poisoned the monster – and struck some chevaliers, too.

Ah, well... the fortunes of war, my friends.

Leopold bit the hurlock and gave him a shake. That seemed to make an impression. Still, the hurlock got off a blow that made the wyvern squeal and double back on itself. Prosper swayed in the saddle, and the men about him shouted and leaped and swerved. For a moment, it seemed like someone else was on the wyvern's back, but that was brief. In the confusion, he felt a brief sting, and

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then realized that he had received a slight cut on his neck from a stray arrow or a flying bit of metal. It was nothing. The Hurlock General was stumbling, overcome with poison and fangs and many wounds.

Prince Florestan shouted again, and gave the creature the *coup de grace* with his glittering sword. A cheer rose up, much to Prosper's disgust.

But there were the Palace steps! All they had to do was destroy the last of the darkspawn and the Palace would be his! Prosper popped another bolt into his crossbow and pulled the trigger. A genlock fell... one of the last. He shouted at Leopold to make for the steps. He would ride up them and make a speech.

His feet were cold. That was odd. His feet, his ankles, his legs. Why was he so cold? The golden doors of the Palace hung ajar, but they shivered into rainbows as his vision faded.

"Wha... What's happening to me?" he gasped out, his tongue thick and reluctant. "Poison..."

The rainbows dissipated, and there was only darkness.

Leopold, sensing a sudden lack of control from his master, bounded back down the stairs and dashed away in search of the other wyverns in the city, the dead man still strapped to his back. Soldiers stared after the retreating Duke.

Corot, Prince Florestan's advisor, said solemnly. "The noble Duke has perished in the defense of our country. May his sacrifice not be in vain."

Ursus finished off the last hurlock, and made his way back to his Prince's side. The little dagger with its carefully

envenomed blade was carefully replaced in its invisible sheath behind his big dagger. The big man smiled quietly. He was tired of having to fight off Duke Prosper's assassins. On the way up the Avenue of the Sun there had been another one, and he had almost got Florestan with an arrow. Best to tear up treason by the roots. He gave Corot a discreet gesture. The other man nodded almost imperceptibly. Prosper had thought the Prince a fool, because he was a decent man. He had not considered that those who loved Florestan might not be as decent.

"Come, my prince," Ursus rumbled. "The Palace is ours. You should go up to the top of the steps and say something to encourage the others."

Florestan blew out a breath, and ascended the bloody steps willingly enough. Too bad he could not do this in full sunlight, but the day was what it was. He wiped the rain from his face. "All right. A word. And then we've got to get back to the battle. Queen Bronwyn is counting on us."

He hoped he would survive today. Orlais would need a leader, now that Duke Prosper was gone. He had died bravely, at least, but Florestan was deeply relieved that the young and lovely Celandine would no longer be forced to marry him.

"My friends and comrades!" he shouted. "A victory! The first of many, I trust, and the beginning of the end of the Blight! *Vive la Reine Rouge! Vive l'Impératrice!*"

They could not get the Archdemon to stay on the ground,

and the rain was making its scales slippery. Whenever Bronwyn tried to scramble onto its back, it would beat its injured wings, she would slide off, and the dragon would come down in another part of the square. She could not even get a secure enough footing to try sinking one of the spring-loaded anchors into its back, risky as that would be.

They had tried the golems against the Archdemon, but it was simply too tall for them, and they could not do any significant damage. They were knocked down and knocked back: not hurt, but ineffectual. Astrid sent them off to support the Antivans on the left flank.

The ballistae were at the ready, but could only shoot when the Archdemon was in the air, and even then it moved too quickly for a solid hit. One bolt had gone completely through the widest part of the sail of the right wing, but it was a clean hole, and dragon could still fly — at least well enough to gain altitude and come down again, instinct driving it to attack the Wardens again and again. Leliana swore with frustration at her wet bowstring that played havoc with her aim. Only magic was reliable in this weather. Tara was the least injured of the senior mages, and cast curses on the Archdemon with terrible, single-minded anger.

Darkspawn skittered through the alleys; they jumped from upper windows down into the square. Some got past Loghain's lines, and Fenris found himself fighting two genlocks at once. Another crept up behind him and then fell to Zevran's thrown dagger. Silas fought on doggedly, already exhausted.



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A bolt of lightning flashed above them, and thunder rolled out almost simultaneously. The rain came down harder, and diluted the blood on the stones in the square.

It was a madhouse around the Archdemon, as Wardens thrust and slashed at it with their spears and tried not to kill each other. Spears became lodged, and Wardens clung to them, trying to get them out and dodge the Archdemon at the same time.

Oghren was behind the dragon, ripping through massive tendons, stabbing again and again.

"D'you like that? D'you like that?" he jeered. "How 'bout a little more?"

The Archdemon shrieked, as Brosca stabbed it in the mouth. It reared back, carrying her with it, while she tried to yank the spear free.

"Brosca! Let go!" Bronwyn yelled. At the same moment, Alistair shouted. "Oghren, look out!"

Brosca let go, and landed hard on the pavement. Oghren was too rapt in bloodlust to heed Alistair.

The Archdemon stumbled, slipping in the standing water, and took a step backward. There was a shocked bellow, and Oghren's armor held for a split-second, before the full weight of the Archdemon came down, crushing the dwarf flat. Aveline, inches away, staggered back, wild-eyed, her spear trembling in her hands.

"Maker!" Alistair croaked, turning his eyes from the horror on the ground. They had no time to grieve; no time for anything but fighting.



THE RED QUEEN

Bustrum, practiced climber that he was, got a leg up from Ostap and managed to deploy his anchor into the Archdemon's back. There was a meaty thud as the prongs dug deep into Tainted flesh. The Archdemon shrieked again, and before Bustrum could buckle the strap around himself, the dragon was airborne. Bustrum and Alistair both tried to grab the dangling strap and were carried along with the creature, until the wet leather slipped through their grasp and they fell to the ground. Bustrum landed lightly, but Alistair twisted his ankle on impact.

"Maker's breath!" he groaned. He looked up wildly, expecting the Archdemon to come down on top of him. He rolled away, and looked around desperately for a Healer.

The dragon came down some distance away. Bronwyn reached for the anchor strap, missed, and slipped off the dragon's side again. She danced away from the talons and snapping jaws, swearing.

"I'll try this!" Riordan shouted to her.

He sheathed his spear and uncoiled the rope on his back, swinging the grappling hook in ever-widening circles. The Archdemon paused just long enough, and he threw the hook, catching the right wing at the second joint and ripping through tough hide.

Another shriek. The Archdemon went mad, beating its wings with a powerful stroke that sent Riordan clanging along the ground, stunned. Its tail lashed out, knocking its enemies flying, smashing through the front of the

nearest building, showering the Wardens with shattered stone. Morrigan's balcony creaked dangerously, and she shifted to a hawk and fluttered away, panicked.

The Wardens below were not so lucky. Maeve died instantly of a broken neck. Among the archers and mages, Nevin, Cathair, and five more were brained by falling masonry. Others were down, some injured badly.

At that moment, the Marcher Wardens arrived, shouting a hurrah. The darkspawn that Loghain's forces had been holding back on the left found themselves attacked from the rear, and crushed between the hammer and the anvil.

Seeing the destruction of its minions, the Archdemon took off, trailing the rope and the anchor strap, headed for the safety of the south tower of the Cathedral. The ballistae loosed as soon as the dragon was high enough, but the engines were soggy with rain, and the aim was off. Two bolts missed, and one hit a glancing blow. The Archdemon's bellow blended with a peal of thunder.

"Stop it! It's getting away!" Bronwyn shouted, her voice cracking. Rain poured down her face like tears. "It's getting away!"

She would have run down the Avenue of the Sun after it, but Riordan caught her, a strong hand on her shoulder.

"We shall have to hunt it now," he said, grave but calm. "But I think this round should be awarded to us. We have paid enough for it."

CHAPTER 24

THE LIGHTNING-
STRUCK TOWER,
REDUX

THEY NEEDED TIME TO REST AND LICK THEIR WOUNDS, BUT THERE WAS LITTLE TIME TO SPARE. The dead were carried out of the rain and placed in the buildings remaining around the Place Reville. One elegant townhouse was chosen for the Warden dead and wounded. The latter were laid out in the ravaged rear parlor off the entry hall; the former in the library. Anders gave Niall and Maeve's valuables to a distraught Quinn.

"I don't want their coin!" the boy cried.

"Take it," Anders advised. "It's what you've got for keepsakes."

They had lost over a score of Wardens so far, which included three Antivans killed in an unlucky encounter with some shrieks, and a pair of Orlesians killed by the Archdemon. The door was closed on the dead and Tara wrote a warning on it.

"Sacred to the Grey Wardens. Trespassers will be hunted down and fed to the darkspawn."



THE RED QUEEN

And of course they were starving. Aeron and Emrys found the kitchen, the buttery, the pantry, and the wine cellar, and shared out what was fit to eat. The pantry stank unspeakably, for the fish and fowl that had been fresh on the day Val Royeaux fell was now anything but. The milk and butter had long since turned, too, of course. The rotting bodies of the dead residents who had fled upstairs did not much help the smell. The reek had permeated much of the other foodstuffs: sausages and hams that were cured and would be otherwise edible. Not even a Duster could stomach them.

Not all was ruined. Bread and pies had moldered in the pantry, but preserved in barrels were dried fruit and pickled herrings that could still be consumed. Wheels of cheese covered in wax were untouched. Also covered in wax were crocks of honey and jars of sweet preserves. There were crates of root vegetables that the rats had not lived long enough to investigate. There were boxes of chocolate and of sugar plums, kept for the delight of the wealthy. Some barrels contained fine white flour, and some held oats and barley, which could be boiled up in hastily wiped cauldrons. There was an oven, which would take time to fire up, but could be used to make flat bread. Gilded furniture in the ballroom was broken up to fuel the cookfires.

There was wine in plenty, including Orlesian honey wine. The cistern on the roof was found and the water in it discovered to be safe enough. This place, guarded by a few Wardens, could serve as a refuge and a supply center.



THE RED QUEEN

All around the Place Reville, various units were claiming their own headquarters. People were exhausted. In turns, they could eat and rest and prepare for the next move.

Leliana told off some of the newer Wardens to this duty: a few who were too injured to chase the Archdemon, but fit to stand guard and make their way around a kitchen. There were those who had never been warriors before the Blight, but who knew how to cook.

"Make a nourishing stew," she said. "It will not take long for potatoes, onions and barley to cook. Make it in small pots, so the water will boil faster. Add the herring to it. It will not be fine, but it will be hot and put strength in us. A few at a time will come back here."

Sigrun and Brosca, practiced pilferers that they were, discovered a wealth of silver spoons for eating the stew, a hodgepodge of elegant bowls and plates to serve it in, and a parade of crystal goblets and jeweled cups for their drink.

During the halt, the army remained on guard. Sporadic waves of darkspawn burst out into the square and were promptly destroyed. The golems were invaluable, for they needed neither rest, nor food, nor water.

Cauthrien suggested building barricades to Loghain, but he only approved them for some of the side streets.

"We can't settle down here. We've got to move on after the Archdemon, and we've got to leave the Avenue open."

Bronwyn had not taken part in clearing out the Warden's headquarters, but remained outside, sheltered from the rain

by a pillared loggia, looking through a spyglass, watching the Archdemon on the distant tower watching her.

Alistair, came outside, Scrapper trailing behind him, and brought her some food.

"You need to eat," he told her. On a painted fish plate with a gilded rim lay a bizarre assortment of food: herrings, olives, chocolate almonds, dried apricots from Antiva, and a big wedge of Haute-Cantal cheese. "And drink," he added, passing her a silver goblet of what tasted like a earthy Mourvèdre red. "That's good with the cheese. I tried it."

"You and cheese," she said, smiling in spite of herself. She gave some of the herring to Scout, who snapped it up, licking his chops, and then angled for a bit of cheese. "We had some good cheese after the Tower of Ishal. Remember?"

"Do I!" he scoffed. "Like I could ever forget! Especially the Amaranthine blue. That was fabulous. I would have brought you bread, but there isn't any. Leliana put Rabille and Lucy to work cooking. Some others, too. They'll stay and make some stew out the odds and ends and try to bake some quick bread. Guard the place a bit. Anders is working on the wounded in there. You should come in and sit for awhile."

She shook her head. "Not now."

It had not been long, really, but they needed to advance. Bronwyn wolfed her food down hungrily and finished her wine in a long swallow. Riordan, Sainsby, and Visconti were coming — Sainsby was stuffing his face with a fistful of soft cheese — and it was time to pull their people together.

"You should have seen the Imperial Market!" Sainsby was saying to Visconti. "Prime stuff there, I can tell you..."

Riordan, predictably, did not look pleased to hear about the plundering of his homeland. Sainsby desisted, and began talking eagerly about ropes and grappling hooks.

Jowan came out of the Warden's house, walking normally. Bronwyn wondered how he could be fit to fight after such a serious burn, but he seemed determined. Lily bounded at his side, looking up at him every few steps.

"How are you?" Bronwyn asked.

"Fine, fine, no problem in the world," Jowan said hastily, which Bronwyn did not find particularly reassuring.

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. I'm bandaged up and I'll be fine. Anders is coming in a minute," he added. "He left a couple of the new mages with the wounded. Between him and the First Enchanter, his leg seems fine. Amazing talent, really." He looked about, and saw Morrigan, sitting apart, daintily consuming a jar of strawberry preserves. "Have you seen Velanna? Has she come back?"

Bronwyn grimaced. "No. I have no idea what happened to her. She was last seen running off in wyvern form up the Avenue of the Sun. Morrigan warned me that mages can get too involved in their shape-shifting. Maybe she's forgotten she's an elf."

Alistair burst out in an involuntary laugh. "Impossible! Or at least, she'll remember it pretty soon."

Bronwyn smiled too, a little, but was annoyed at the potential loss of a powerful mage. Velanna had always been wayward.

The dwarves were coming out to join them, Astrid at their head. Orzammar dwarves hated rain, but there was nothing to be done about it. Loghain was talking to his old friends among the Dalish Elves. It was time to push on to the Cathedral.

Reveling in her power and freedom, Velanna bounded through the streets, spitting, smashing, ripping darkspawn as she went. Rain poured off her sides unheeded. An ogre started up, puzzled at her appearance, and she knocked him down and disemboweled him with a single swat. It was glorious to be so strong, to have nothing to fear. Her thoughts seemed different, more straightforward, more responsive to her senses as a wyvern. No darkspawn was her equal, and any shemlen in her way was no more than an ant to be crushed underfoot. In fact, she felt eager; ready for anything. Let the shemlen try to stop her.

Let the Wardens swarm over the Archdemon and die. She had done her part. Why should she give her life for those who had destroyed the Dales? She was sick of Bronwyn, that shemlen hypocrite, with her ever-so-noble-and-generous attitude; and even sicker of Astrid, that squat little one-armed durgen'len, who imagined she had the right to tell any of the elven what to do. The noise of battle faded as she left it behind, enjoying the sensation of running fast along curving streets, sometimes using her little wings to get a bit of lift

so she could bound up to the rooftops. She killed the darkspawn where she found them, and needed no orders. It was a joy to escape them all at last, even Merrill with her earnest advice and Lanaya with her disapproving looks. She did not need them. She did not need anybody.

Her side was still tender, but it would heal in time. Wyverns were tough. Being a wyvern was very agreeable.

Stones rattled to her right. Something big was coming up the street in her direction, and coming fast. She lifted her snout, and smelled wyvern.

Was it that fool Jowan, or that simpering flat-ears Tara? Morrigan would not be following her — the shemlen witch had no use for Velanna, and the feeling was mutual. Anders would be busy healing Niall, so it would be neither of them. Danith had liked Niall... But he was a shemlen, and no concern of hers. In fact, what did any of them matter to her? Velanna the Dalish elf was fading, and Velanna the wyvern seemed far superior.

She sniffed again, and with her wyvern-keen senses, identified the smell.

Leopold, the shemlen Duke's pet! The beast must have escaped and was running loose. Velanna chuffed a harsh wyvern laugh at the thought of the chaos that would cause. Would the pompous shemlen demand that they all cease their fighting and return his prize to him?

The wyvern burst through a blocked alley and scrambled to a halt within spitting distance. Velanna was surprised

to see that the Duke was riding on Leopold, but he was not shouting orders or complaints. He looked... Velanna padded closer, while Leopold's great golden eyes stared at her.

The shemlen was dead! That was amusing. The dead man was propped up by the straps and buckles, his eyes open, a look of comical surprise on his face.

The ridiculously opulent harness was hampering the other wyvern's movements. Velanna came closer yet, and let the male smell her. Then, very carefully, she extended a single talon, and tore delicately through the saddle girth. Leopold did not move. With a noise like a sigh and then a thump, the saddle, Duke and all, spilled sideways onto the cobblestones, and Leopold was free. He trumpeted a glad cry, and she answered in kind. Sensing more darkspawn, Velanna squealed and went to hunt them down. Happy enough to please the female, Leopold followed, not much liking the darkspawn's smell either. The master was dead and his hold on Leopold gone forever. They should leave this strange, stony place, and find his old mountains...

The Gate of the Moon was shut. A deep voice was raised in command, shouting almost-words behind the defenses of Val Royeaux. The darkspawn had swung the bronze portal closed with maddening slowness, as Pentaghast and his Wardens dashed across the battlefield. Here the defensive topography of the Tevinters worked against them, for instead of a flat plain, they faced hills and val-

leys and abrupt drop-offs. By the time they were within bowshot, the gate was barred and the Wardens exposed to a withering volley of arrows and magic.

"Take cover!"

There was no choice but to withdraw behind the tall buttresses of the Imperial Highway. It would be a siege, after all.

"Something's going on in the city!" Athis shouted in her commander's ear. "Where's the Archdemon?"

"Up to no good, I daresay." He laughed. "Our Tevinter brethren will just have to make the rough places plain again, so we can bring up what siege engines we've got."

The Tevinters were in a huddle with Elagabalus, their commander, and were apparently about to do just that... or something of the sort. However, they were also waving their blood-spattered hands and discussing a project that very soon began to take shape: a growing hillock with a stone foundation, growing higher, and higher, as the Tevinters tried to create a place that would allow them to see over the city walls. It was amazing. It was rather horrifying. And because they were on a coastal plain, the earth was not really stable enough to support a pile of dirt very easily. The observation platform would suffice for the moment. The First Warden made them concentrate on the the battlefield next.

A rearguard was posted around the Place Reville, and the army resumed its march, sending out scouts and skirmishers to lure the darkspawn out. As far as possible, Loghain

maintained his multiple column tactics, but some streets came to dead ends, or curved off in inconvenient directions. Every unit had its map, even if only in the leader's head, and they had points at which they would make contact.

He decided to drop the attack on the Alienage, since Visconti told him that though a powerful darkspawn had been there, it had since moved on to the north, and was probably engaged in defending that wall.

"Good," Loghain briefly replied. "If it's pinned down there, it's not fighting us."

A golem was assigned to each of the flanks, and they walked through fire, poison, and arrows unimpeded. Shale and the other three were at the head of the main column, just behind the skirmishers. The ballistae were rolled along, and with some watchful mages, formed a protection for the bomb wagon. A chance fireball would not easily set off the lyrium explosives, but they wanted no accidents.

The Qunari, their number down by two, moved with the main column as well. Sten had a better idea now of what each man could do. They were not bad soldiers, by any means, though inexperienced in fighting any enemies other than Tevinters and Rivainnis.

Now that their presence was known to the Archdemon, the numbers sent against them were far greater. The mages were doing better and better against the darkspawn, now able to cast area-of-effect spells in advance and together, something most of them had never tried before. The results

were astonishing: in one case, the shaking earth had brought down an entire building being used by darkspawn snipers.

"They just... brought it down!" Bronwyn said to Alistair, absolutely astonished. "That's amazing!"

"That's why the Templars learn how to bring *mages* down," Alistair pointed out, though not very loudly. "You know you might well be giving them ideas."

"True," Bronwyn said softly. It was a moral quandary. She was giving mages ideas about using their powers... even letting them recognize that they *were* powerful when they had a common purpose.

But why *shouldn't* mages achieve their potential? Why should mages be imprisoned and emasculated, just so the non-magical could enslave them and imagine themselves morally superior *because* they lacked magical powers? It was awkward for anyone who truly believed – as Bronwyn believed she did – in the pursuit of excellence. She herself was superior to some others – in birth, in ability – and believed herself to have the right to rule them. That did not mean, however, that she had the right to tyrannize over them, to kill or torment them at will, or to permit others to do so. The Tevinter mages, as far as she could see, had taken their magical gifts to mean they had the right to do all those things. And Bronwyn had certainly seen the variation of intelligence, character, and talent among her own mages. Having magic no more made a mage a superior being than having high birth had made Vaughan Kendells fit to rule a

pigpen. Niall had been a kindly man, wanting to work for the common good; Velanna was a bitter, hostile harridan who cared little for anyone she did not personally love.

Bronwyn still felt their new Fereldan way was the best way: it gave mages an outlet for their gifts and ambitions, like letting steam vent from a pot. Let Bethany Hawke heal the sick in her clinic; let Enchanter Uldred and his mages serve in the army. It did not have to be an all-or-nothing situation. No one was putting the mages in charge: they were instead being allowed to make something of their lives. What would come of this experiment, she could not guess.

"King Loghain!" shouted a messenger, one of a patrol of four who ran at double time into the Avenue. "News from the Palace! The Orlesians have taken it, and the dark-spawn leader is slain!"

A hearty cheer rose up, especially from the other Orlesians. The messenger reached Loghain, bowed, and said, far more gravely. "But there is sorrow, too. Duke Prosper was slain in the battle. Prince Florestan has assumed command."

"Unfortunate," Loghain responded, wondering what the Orlesians would do if he decided to dance the Remigold. In a way it really was unfortunate. Prosper was a capable fellow, and no doubt the Palace district had been taken due to his good sense. However, he was manifestly going to be a thorn in Ferelden's flesh later on. Loghain did not know much about Prince Florestan, other than the very silly moon-calf looks he directed at Bronwyn, but he was far less likely to give them

trouble once they tried to get out of this awful country.

Bronwyn's reaction was somewhat different. She had been rather nervous about Prosper and his ambitions herself, but could see that it was a pity for Orlais to lose a strong leader at this juncture. Florestan would no doubt do his best, but she suspected that Nevarra would get more territory from him than it would have from the Duke de Montfort.

Very soon the main body, led by Florestan himself, appeared, joining up at an intersection.

"Your Majesties," he said, bowing to Bronwyn, and nodding more casually to Loghain. "You have heard the news."

"Yes," said Bronwyn. "We commiserate with you on the loss of the noble Duke. He was our esteemed ally."

"Then we shall avenge him," said Florestan. "You have not seen him, have you? He was still in the saddle – quite dead – when his wyvern ran away."

Loghain took a deep breath. It would never do to laugh.

"Have you ever been inside the Cathedral?' Bronwyn asked Riordan.

"Of course. Not in the more private areas. Perhaps Ser Silas would be of more help there."

"He described it in detail to me, but it's not the same as seeing it for myself. I've promised our Qunari allies a look at the vaults, since they want a book back that the Chantry borrowed some time ago." Briefly, she described the arrangement she had made about the Tome of Koslun.

Riordan was pragmatic about it.

"I have been only in the sanctuary and the chapel of the Disciple Havard. Twice I have been received in the Divine's audience chamber. That is all."

"What about the bell tower? Silas says there's a spiral staircase going all the way to the top."

"Yes, I have been there, long ago. One must obtain leave, but it gives one a superb view of the city. Not as splendid as the one no doubt afforded by the White Spire, but that, alas, is no more, and it was nearly impossible of access. But I remember enjoying the privilege of climbing to the top of the south tower. It was a long climb, on a narrow, decorative spiral staircase. One saw the bells, of course, which were very interesting, and then one emerged into an elaborate room that opened out onto the roof garden. Both towers have flat roofs, and they were used for outings and picnics by the nobles and priests. Sometimes the Divine met with high clergy on the north roof, especially if they wished to make it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop, I am told."

"So we could send a force up the staircase to attack the Archdemon on the roof."

"We could, if the Archdemon did not inconveniently fly away. It would hear us coming, and would no doubt have darkspawn stationed on the staircase the entire way. There is only room for one at a time to pass. The ascent would be slow... and deadly."

She nodded, a plan forming in her mind.

"Horde," indeed.

Innumerable darkspawn crowded within the Cathedral Compound, even after the golems had smashed the gates. The Archdemon swooped down, flaming, but the press was so thick that the flames incinerated its own minions, as well as soldiers and Wardens.

The engineers were dealing more effectively with the rain. The ballistae, brought up near the walls, were tilted up, and scored two hits. The Archdemon flapped away unsteadily, up to the refuge of the Cathedral tower, another hole in its right wing and a deep wound in its neck. Lightning flashed overhead, briefly dazzling them all. Darkspawn, Bronwyn discovered, really disliked lightning. That had not registered on her before, but it made sense.

Despite being bloodied so badly, Tara, Anders, Jowan, and Morrigan changed into wyvern form, and helped the golems drive into the Cathedral square. There was no question of riding them, this time, for in this press, the wyverns would need maximum agility and the freedom to perform feats that would snap any rider's neck. Once in, they were followed by a mass of Grey Wardens and a solid phalanx of the Legion of the Dead. The rest of the army opened up the wedge, spreading out through the compound, maintaining a guard over the chokepoints at the gates.

Bronwyn fought her way through, with Alistair at her right and Zevran at her left. It made her feel ill.. uneasy..

to be here, remembering that the Divine had named her anathema in this very place. While it was easy to scoff to other people, the sentence had preyed on her mind and caused her a certain degree of pain. The place was crawling with darkspawn, and the holy statues surrounding the square were defiled, but this had once been the heart of the Chantry, and it had cast her out. There might even be those among the Orlesians who had seen it. Prosper had.

But Prosper is dead, and cannot speak of it ever again.

Oddly, that gave her some relief, unworthy as it was. For her part, she would like that episode to be utterly forgotten. She had enemies, she knew, and she could imagine with what spiteful pleasure they would gnaw the bone of her humiliation. Her cousin Habren's face sprang to mind, and Bronwyn almost laughed at herself for caring what that vicious little fool might think, comfortable and cosseted in her estate in Denerim.

Darkspawn blood splashed in Zevran's face, and Bronwyn glanced at him in alarm. How many after today would be Tainted? It might not be the secretive Grey Wardens' policy, but she would offer the Joining to any it might save. If she could catch her breath, she must tell someone that.

More darkspawn poured through the far northern portal. They must get there and get it barricaded. Triumphant wyvern screams resounded, and golems shook the earth. Irving led some of the mages up to a clear space on a walkway along the low walls, where they could cast

directly into the heart of the squirming mass of darkspawn. A raging storm rose up in a perfect circle, buffeting and freezing the creatures. A firestorm was tried, but the rain was too heavy for it to be entirely effective. No, lightning and ice was the order of the day.

Or night. It could hardly be more than a little past sundown, but it was dark now, the heavy stormclouds blotting out the light. The battle was lit with flashes of lightning, with darkspawn bonfires smouldering luridly in the shelter of the Cathedral, and with magefire blazing from hundreds of staffs.

Light blazed from the Cathedral, too, through the shattered windows and sagging doors, from the top of the belltower, and most eerily, from the purple, arcane fire streaming from the maw of the Archdemon.

Distantly, she heard Loghain's voice bellowing a command, as Greagoir and his Templars fought their way up to the wall to defend the mages.

Then she tripped on a root, and nearly went down. Someone behind her steadied her with a hand — she thought it was Emrys— and then she realized the thick tendril stretching across the square was no treeroot.

"Broodmother shit!" shouted Brosca to Astrid. "Guess this must be the place, Princess Paragon!"

Now that they were closer, they could see more of the tendrils. Nor were they all. Pulsing sacs clustered around the ornate doorway, and much of the inside of the Cathedral

sanctuary appeared to be a repulsive shade of flesh-pink.

There were archers up in the tower, and up on the huge peaked roof of the Cathedral, and they were nearly in range of their arrows.

How to attack?

Loghain managed to get close enough to Irving to shout a question.

"Could you bring that tower down?"

"Too big. Maybe in a few days, but the Archdemon would have flown by then."

So, no. Bronwyn and her Wardens wanted to kill the Archdemon, not shoo it away to another place where it could lie low and build a horde all over again. In fact, it was likely that she wanted the Archdemon to stay exactly where it was. The snipers, however, had to go.

"Target the archers in the tower and on the roof," he ordered. "Get rid of them."

As the square was somewhat cleared, bands of soldiers with shields made a moving shelter for some picked archers and mages. They locked their shields, and crept forward, a little at a time, while others gave them cover. Those under the shields would peer out between the cracks, choosing a target, and then at a quiet word would pop up, and send a lethal message to the darkspawn.

Meanwhile, Bronwyn needed to get a message to Loghain. Her plan was now clear in her mind, and he had a critical role to play. She turned to pass the information to Emrys,

trusting him to get every word right. He looked rather shocked, but was too disciplined to give her an argument. He slipped away, running toward Loghain and his men.

"Keep the Archdemon's attention. Make it clear that you're trying for the tower staircase, but can't get there?" Loghain growled. "Just what does the Queen have in mind?"

"I think," Emrys said, trying to be tactful with majesty, "That she means to do here what she did at the Rock." He nodded over to the Wardens, still surging against the darkspawn. "They've got ropes, Lord King. They've got grappling hooks. While the Archdemon laughs at us, thinking we'll never get up that narrow staircase, the Queen will be up and over the top with the Wardens, and be on the Archdemon before it knows what's happening."

Loghain felt rather sick, not liking the idea of Bronwyn risking herself like that; but also rather excited, wondering if it could possibly work. She had done it at Ostagar; she had done it at the Rock. Here, the greatest danger was from her own people.

"Pass the word," he ordered a lieutenant. "No matter what anyone sees, they are to point and shout only at the Archdemon itself and at the base of the tower. If they see climbers, they're not to betray them to the darkspawn!"

He swung his troops around, sheltering the Wardens from the darkspawn mob as well as possible. The Qunari and his men were in earshot. Loghain got Sten's attention,

and pointed at the north gate of the compound.

"Help that golem hold the gate. If the Wardens are to take the Archdemon, we don't need any more darkspawn in here!"

Sten nodded curtly, and led his men in a flying wedge through the seething mass.

Riordan had cut his way to Bronwyn and they were able to step back just enough, behind a broken statue, to confer.

She told him, "I've asked Loghain to make a lot of noise and confusion down here. The Archdemon knows we can never get up that staircase, but it doesn't realize that there's another way."

He grinned fiercely. "Just like Ostagar."

"Exactly. The army and most of the Wardens must hold off the darkspawn, while I and my climbers go up the side of the tower." She gestured at it. "Look at it! It's ideal for a climber: plenty of ledges, plenty of carving, plenty of buttresses. I can start with my rope there — " she pointed. "And get up there and swing it up to that— "

"By the Maker!" he exclaimed. "I shall go with you!"

"It's going to be dangerous in the rain," she warned him. "The stones will be slick."

He gave a very Orlesian shrug. "It's not like I was going to live forever."

"If you've got any hill folk among your people, bring them. I've got a pair of Avvars who are splendid, and some others who have climbed with me in the past. And I've got Morrigan and Anders who don't need ropes to get up

there. Speaking of which... "

She sounded a signal on her horn to recall the wyverns, who had done about all they could do in the compound without harming their own people. Instantly, they raced back to Bronwyn, slaying darkspawn as they bounded along. Pools of wyvern poison spread out on the stones. Trampled underfoot, Bronwyn noticed a straw-stuffed effigy dressed in rotting rags, and shivered.

Alistair was coming with her. Bronwyn had not the heart to order him away, though she felt she should. This was something he needed, if only for his self-respect. Nor were the climbers all Fereldan.

Riordan was coming, with a band of chosen Wardens. It was his country, after all, and no one had a better right than he. Bronwyn wondered how many would actually make it up the tower. The rain showed no signs of letting up, and the lightning flashes were startling and ominous.

Astrid could not follow Bronwyn up to the roof. It was galling, but she was no climber. She would have not the first idea how to shimmy up a rope, or whatever it was Bronwyn intended to do. Not that she wanted to risk striking the final blow, for she had every intention of surviving the Blight. Still, it would have looked better for a Paragon of Orzammar to be in the thick of things, helping. Now she was relegated to the ranks of the bystanders: to

the press of soldiers and Wardens who would simply be making a *diversion* for the real heroes.

The party that had helped Bronwyn take the Rock would be going with her: Anders, Morrigan, Zevran and Tara, the Avvars, Darach, Quinn, Sigrun, even Brosca, who was gallingly more devoted to Bronwyn than to her own Paragon. Carver Hawke was going as well. Leliana was over there, gabbling furiously that she could make the climb, too, not wanting to be left behind.

What Astrid needed was a deed of as equal stature as possible, something that would not cause Bronwyn difficulty, but would be worthy and noble in itself, and...

Of course. The Broodmothers. The nest.

Besides, it was the most plausible distraction. It would be safer to do it now, too, than later, when the darkspawn would no longer have the Archdemon to protect. Most of all, Astrid *wanted* to do it now.

She pushed her way through the crowd to tell Bronwyn her idea.

"It would be safer after the Archdemon's gone," Bronwyn pointed out, looking a bit puzzled. "We could all go together."

"I have a sufficiently large party," Astrid disagreed stiffly. "I shall take Falkor, Hakan, and Soren. I'll have a large number of Legion of the Dead and I'll also take Shale with me. Better to destroy the nest now."

Bronwyn's voice sharpened a little. "I'd rather you didn't. It could startle the Archdemon away."

She looked very determined, and so Astrid, knowing she would not win in a contest of force, resorted to cunning. "Just as you say, then."

Bronwyn gave her a nod and darted off to join the climbing party. Astrid waited until she was absorbed in preparations, and then began quietly giving her own orders to bring up the wagon loaded with lyrium bombs.

A strong party of shield-bearers pressed toward the darkspawn guarding the staircase to the tower. "Guarding?" "Occupying" was a better word. There was a genlock or hurlock on every step. Visconti and Sainsby had gathered all those who could protect themselves from arrows, and who also could shout and make trouble. They had to strike a nice balance. They must attract the Archdemon's attention without actually frightening the dragon away.

It was dangerous, too. Many of the darkspawn used poisoned arrows, and an otherwise innocuous hit to ankle or calf could prove fatal.

The two commanders agreed, though, that as soon as there was the least hint that the Archdemon was failing, they would loose everything they had on the staircase.

Bronwyn last farewell was particularly painful. "Scout! See Loghain? Go to Loghain and Amber. I'll be back soon. No, I can't take you with me. You're too big. Go to Loghain." The mabari whimpered, backing away reluctantly.

Bronwyn felt like crying herself.

"Go to Loghain!"

Meanwhile, Astrid had Falkor find Ser Silas. The Templar was distracted, just having bid Leliana farewell and given her a blessing.

"Is there a way into the Cathedral other than the big front door?" Astrid asked, not wasting time in games.

He knew several. When asked, he was quite willing to help Astrid fight her way to the best one for their purposes: the service entry.

"It is there that tradesmen made deliveries: food, silks, candles, firewood. It lets one into the lower reaches of the Grand Cathedral."

"Then that's where we're going."

Loghain noticed a large force of dwarves move around to the far side of the Cathedral, but believed them to be part of the holding action at the north gate of the compound. That seemed to be effective, and he concentrated on directing the slaughter of darkspawn in the south-east corner. Once they had rid themselves of the nearest dangers, they could hold off the darkspawn outside the compound walls, while the tiny figures he determinedly tried not to look at crawled up the south side of the Cathedral tower like so many ants.

Lightning struck the tower just as Bronwyn was high enough in her climb for a fall to be inescapably fatal. The Archdemon

echoed the thunderclap with a wild scream. It was frightening.

Bronwyn suspected that she was not the only one who thought so. Tara had begged and pleaded and cried to go along, and soft-hearted Ostap had once again agreed to carry her on his back. Bronwyn was higher than anyone else at the moment, and knew better than to look down or even look around her for her comrades, but this was a bad climb, and they would be lucky to make it. She did not see how all of them could. She had told her friends to take their time, and do their best, and that it was not a race. Once they were at the top, they would try to wait for at least a few others, and Anders and Morrigan would certainly be there. Bronwyn reckoned that even with a half-dozen and the element of surprise, they very likely could carry the day. The Archdemon was looking either down into the Cathedral courtyard, or north over the walls. It was blind in its left eye, and with any kind of luck would not see them coming over the south side of the tower's edge.

In some ways it was easier than Ishal. There were many more ledges for grappling hooks to sink into, and a generally rougher surface. Her boots had no trouble gaining purchase on the wall. But no one had watched her climb Ishal. Destiny had rested in her hands that night, but no one had known that. Now, thousands of eyes below could see her, trusting her not to fail; trusting her to see them through this.

The bowels of the Cathedral were filled with a loathsome

mass of Broodmother matter. Stinking and spongy, it clung to one's boots with every footstep, and let go with a wet little hiss each time. Astrid was uncomfortably aware that she had never fought a Broodmother, and had no one in her party who had. Perhaps she should have summoned Sten.

But no: he was at the north gate and had plenty to do. The danger and glory of this venture were hers alone. She had heard the stories and asked the proper questions. She knew what to expect. And she had Shale, which was immensely reassuring.

So the tentacles rising from the floor did not completely unman her party. Shale stunned them with blows. The axemen came forward and chopped at them lustily. When darkspawn lunged at them from the shadows, Astrid's people were prepared. Distant moans rose further on.

Silas said, "The only place I can think of that would be large enough for what you describe is the Cathedral laundry. It's a vast chamber, with high vaulted ceilings. It had to be big for the boilers and the wide tubs."

"I don't want to go *into* the laundry," Astrid told him. "I want to find the floor above and drop these bombs down into it. Can you lead us there?"

"I believe so."

He led them through a maze of storage rooms and still rooms, along corridors with heavy, broken doors, lined with more of the foul tendrils. Dark blood stained the stone floors.

"Do you know where the vault is?" Astrid thought briefly of Sten and his book.

"Yes, but it's much further west, under the statue of Andraste herself."

"Forget it, then."

Rain fell on them in places. Part of the building's roof had collapsed, leaving a sizable hole to admit weather. Much of the main sanctuary floor had collapsed as well, piling rubble below. Picking their way through to their destination was no easy task. They had to change direction when one tunnel proved too narrow and low for Shale to pass at all.

Astrid's senses were on fire. There was a massive darkspawn presence ahead and below: exactly what she would expect of a Broodmother nest. As they moved deeper into the Cathedral, they found that tendrils had insinuated themselves everywhere: trailing down corridors, bursting open doors. They draped from floor to ceiling, everywhere laden with swelling sacs. Thousands of darkspawn were gestating here.

No one said anything. There was nothing to say. The stink was indescribable.

Behind her came her Wardens and her loyal Legion of the Dead. Many were heavily burdened with lyrium bombs that could be linked into compound explosives. Hakan carried the detonators: small devices that could be set off by a hard blow. In places they had to hack through sacs to squeeze through the corridors, spilling out half-formed embryos. Some were mature enough to shriek as Shale stamped the life out of them.

"Disgusting," the golem muttered. "I shall have to stand

in the rain for a long time after this."

Silas looked about him, trying to get his bearings.

"I'm not sure..." he whispered. "Everything looks different."

"We're still going west," Astrid told him. "I've got enough stone sense left to know that."

So they moved on, hacking, hacking; wincing as unspeakable fluids splashed and dripped on them. Astrid saw no way that the Templar would get through this without being Blighted. He would of course be recruited; the Wardens could do far worse.

The moaning was louder now: a chorus of dull despair, ebbing and flowing like an evil tide, eerie music from a myriad of throats.

"I think... here..." Silas said, gesturing at a doorway before them. "It was an airing cupboard for the linen."

Through the door was a wide, circular room, built over some vaulting, which made the floor strange and uneven. The shelves that had once lined the walls had mostly collapsed, and piles of stained linen were scattered around the room, absorbing the spongy damp of the Broodmother matter until the linen was nearly indistinguishable from it.

"Paragon, look!" exclaimed Falkor. Using his axe, he scraped away some of the spongy matter from the floor, exposing a tendril. It had come up through the floor itself, penetrating the stone vaulting. Part of the floor was crumbling away from the support beams. They all felt an unsettling shift beneath their feet.

"Shale, you'll have to go back," Astrid ordered. "We don't want to put any more weight on this floor than necessary. Thanks for your help."

"Nothing, really," snarked the golem. "A mere bagatelle. I was looking forward to my showerbath anyway..." the muttering faded with the sound of heavy footsteps retreating.

Astrid had most of her Legion wait in the corridor, as the explosives team worked swiftly. Brushing stone chips away, they could see down into the chamber below them, but the light was dim. Astrid flinched back from the glimpse of monstrous bodies packed together, tentacles waving gently in an arcane breeze. The rest of the party were looking, too, through the other cracks in the floor. Ser Silas' face was drawn with the horror of it. Astrid shrugged off the emotions of surfacers, not quite grasping that the core of Silas' horror was the likelihood that some the monsters below had been women he knew.

Astrid steeled herself and took another look. She could see no sign of active darkspawn down there. They could widen some of these cracks, assemble the bombs, lower them down, and then detonate them from outside the Cathedral. It was risky, but doable.

Candles were found and lit, giving a little more light to work in. The bombs were taken from packs, and the work of assembly began. Falkor brought out the reels of wire that were to be used to lower them; the kind that would carry the detonating spark. Some of the Legion set to work

carefully widening a few of the cracks in the floor. The men with the detonators handled them gingerly. A premature detonation would kill them all.

"Hurry!" Astrid growled. Silas looked on in wonder. He had heard vague rumors of dwarven explosives. They were apparently quite the equal of Qunari gaatlok.

Grit from the cracks whispered as it sifted away to the floor below them. Falkor fixed the first of the bombs to a wire, pushed it through the floor, and played out the wire from the reel in his hand. Astrid watched, heart pounding in suspense, as the device descended. She twitched the wire slightly to make it settle between two of the horrible, moaning creatures...

Stone exploded up at them in a storm of tentacles. The dwarves screamed as the floor disintegrated, and they slid, inexorably, into the ghastly pit below them. Broodmothers shrilled in rage. The air turned green with poison. More screams, as claws tore at dwarven flesh, and tentacles ripped limbs from bodies. A few had not fallen, but clung to the support beams. Soren shrieked as a tentacle reached out and dragged him down. Hakan was next to him, clutching the detonators to his chest with one hand, clinging to a beam with the other.

From somewhere below, Astrid heard Silas shout, "Maker! Accept your servant into your – *aaahhh!*" A horrible gurgling noise cut his voice off.

Astrid had sunk the hook of her metal arm into a

remaining support beam and hung there, struggling to grab it with her right hand and pull herself up. It was not impossible, as long as –

An explosion below, the first of many, as Hakan lost his grip and fell, setting off the detonator charges. The minor explosion sparked a bundle of bombs nearby, and the resulting chain reaction was so swift that it sounded like one huge thunderclap to those outside the Cathedral.

Broodmothers were reduced to fragments in a burst of glorious blue-white light. As the light rushed up to meet her, Astrid's last thoughts were furious and despairing: an image of Bhelen, smug and smiling, surrounded by his happy family, dedicating a fine memorial statue of their late, great Paragon Astrid, once Gytha Aeducan.

No! no! I was going to be Queen!

The explosion that killed Astrid killed some of Bronwyn's climbers, too.

The entire edifice quaked. No one knew at first what had happened, and they thought it a close, powerful lightning strike. Much of the remaining roof of the Cathedral collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust, and sending the remaining darkspawn snipers down to meet the cobblestones in gruesome splatters. The bell tower shook so hard that two of the bells tolled. Some of the darkspawn fell from the staircase. The Archdemon squawked in alarm, and then screamed in fury as it realized what had hap-

pened to the greatest of the nests. It sent out messages to its remaining lieutenants, summoning them from whatever else they were doing; demanding that they kill its enemies and avenge the nest.

The tremendous noise of the explosion covered the screams of those falling from the tower; those caught in mid-swing on their ropes, or those who were clinging to the stones in the act of tossing their grappling hooks. Thus died Sigrun and Clovis. Thus died Bustrum, who was too good a climber to have fallen for any other reason than someone else's fatal ambition.

Others, like Riordan, Leliana, and Quinn were hurt as their rhythm was thrown off by the shock. Alistair, too, had his nose bloodied by a wall that came up to meet him rather faster than he had planned. He held tight to the rope, and lived.

Bronwyn was perhaps the first one to realize what had happened, and it took her some time to pull herself together.

I will kill her. I am not joking. I am not exaggerating. I will kill Astrid, if I live through this.

Then the terrible unlikelihood of her survival struck her, and she choked back a sob, dangling between heaven and earth. There was so much she wanted to do, and be, and have, and her future seemed no longer than a rope's length.

I should have written Fergus a letter! Why didn't I write to him?

If she allowed herself to think like this, she might as well let go of the rope right now. Hissing a breath through her teeth, she pulled hard and walked up the wall to the

next ledge. Another throw of the grappling hook, and she would be on the last stage of the climb.

Anders, fluttering back and forth desperately, was in a pitiable state. Morrigan might complacently perch on the edge, hidden by the wall at the top of the staircase. He found it impossible to be so calm. At the top of the tower, they had found the little ornate structure that housed the access to the staircase, and had discreetly barricaded the door, so that no darkspawn could burst out to defend the Archdemon. It was not much of a barricade: mostly ornamental urns full of dead flowers, but it was enough.

He longed to encourage his friends, but knew that swooping past them was more likely to startle them. Ostap must have heard Bustrum's death cry. He was struggling on the slick wall, burdened by Tara, and anguished over the loss of his friend. Riordan was gritting his teeth, his elbow no doubt hurting him. Brosca was having trouble getting a secure grip on her rope now, and had slid down several feet. Then there was Alistair, his face bloody. Anders considered taking human form on a ledge and healing some injuries, but the storm and the situation frightened him. Then, too, suddenly being healed might also startle people. Zevran saw him go past, and flashed a fierce grin his way. He, at least, looked unhurt, and not in the least disheartened, even if very, very wet.

When they reach the top. When they reach the top, I'll be waiting. I'll cast a general healing on each one as they reach the top.

Loghain had no idea what had happened in the Cathedral, until a dwarven officer came to pass on the reports of some survivors from the Legion of the Dead. He had flinched away from the shock wave, like everyone else, and then, in dull horror, had seen the little figures tumbling from the tower. Bronwyn had not fallen, but what was she going through?

The dwarf, with pride and grief, told him that Paragon Astrid had led her people into the Cathedral and blown up the nest. Apparently, something had gone wrong and most of her party had been killed by the blast.

"My condolences," Loghain said. His face was stone. He hadn't told the bloody dwarf princess to go in there. The nest could have waited. *Should* have waited.

His head was turned in the direction of the bloody Archdemon, but his gaze was directed to the left, watching the little figure in dark red armor as it neared the top of the tower. What was the matter with the other bloody Wardens? Why did Bronwyn have to do everything herself?

You there, Carver Hawke! Look lively! And you, Brosca! Get yourselves up there and make sure Bronwyn doesn't have to die to save you all!

The darkspawn, at the Archdemon's command, deserted the city wall entirely, rushing south to the Cathedral compound. Their first obstacle came in the form of two angry, vicious wyverns that pounced on the first wave, scattering

them, poisoning them, and ripping them apart.

Velanna, by now totally absorbed in her wyvern guise, could not have shifted back to elven form had she tried. It never occurred to her to do so. Instead, she charged into the darkspawn ranks and reduced them to chaos. Leopold, not to be outdone by the female, bounded along, crushing darkspawn a half-dozen at a blow.

Perhaps they ultimately made a very great difference, for the darkspawn were numerous. Had the full number of these reinforcements hit the north gate of the compound, they might well have overrun the defenses. As it was, the darkspawn were decimated, and they were forced to defend themselves, the archers taking up positions behind the melee fighters.

The last of the hurlock Generals rushed the wyverns, whirling his axe. With a half-intelligible shout, he buried the blade deep in Leopold's spine. The wyvern's ear-piercing shriek temporarily halted Velanna's rampage, but seeing her fellow creature's mortal wound, she renewed her attack with even greater savagery. She charged, knocking the General down. Then she caught his head in her jaws and bit down hard. The indigestible head, with its heavy helmet, was spat out at the darkspawn surrounding her.

More and more darkspawn poured into the street, trying to get past the wyvern and do the Archdemon's will. Velanna fought with all the power of a magical beast. Dozens went down to her poison, her fangs, her claws. They tried to swarm over her, but she leaped up to a statue,

shaking them off, and then pounced, again and again, heedless of wounds, a stranger to fear.

All the northern Wardens outside the walls saw the bright flash of the explosion at the Cathedral reflected against the clouds: it shone with the eerie pale blue of lyrium. The roar came a few seconds later.

Athis wiped the rain from her face and looked at Pentaghast. He shook his head.

"That was no lightning strike."

"In the lore... when the Archdemon dies... they say there's a brilliant light... You don't think..."

The Tevinter lookout on the mound shrieked out the news.

"The darkspawn are withdrawing! They've left the walls! They're not at the gate towers!"

As one, the Wardens started running, running for the Gate of the Moon. A blow like a thousand fists struck the gate. They squealed horribly in response, massive hinges straining, bars made brittle.

"Wait!" shouted Elabagalus, his voice magically magnified. "Stand back!"

The terrible fist of arcane energy struck the gate again, fueled by blood and lyrium. The gates sagged, and then there was a tremendous *snap!* and they slammed back. The Wardens began pouring through, bellowing in triumph.

Fenris was here to fight, and so he fought. He had known

Qunari in his days of wandering: knew and respected them. With Carver off trying to climb the tower, and Jowan wringing his hands as he waited below, Fenris decided it was time for action. Thus it was that he was in the blood-bath at the north gate of the Cathedral compound, holding off the darkspawn reinforcements. He stood, shoulder to shoulder with the defenders, and hacked away at the darkspawn. The golems and Qunari were big enough to resist attempts to push them back.

The army was in a perilous position. By this single-minded pursuit of the Archdemon, they had knowingly cut themselves off from support or retreat. Fenris presumed that was Loghain's strategy, at least. The Archdemon could always create another horde, sack another city, build another nest. Without the Archdemon, the darkspawn would be dangerous monsters, but no more than that: unable to unite in massed attacks, unable to plan. Those on the surface did not have the wits to flee to the Deep Roads, and would have to be hunted down and annihilated. So much Fenris had learned from his Grey Warden friends.

So it was the Archdemon or nothing. The allies were staking everything on killing the dragon early and ending this Blight more quickly than any before. In exchange, they were in great danger now. No doubt more darkspawn had swept around and were poised to attack the south entry to the compound.

The Qunari leader, Sten, was an admirable fellow. Fenris



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did not claim to know him well, but the Qunari was a traveled and intelligent man, and had a far greater breadth of vision than most of his race. And he was a tremendous warrior. He stood tall, lopping off a genlock's head and sweeping a hurlock's feet out from under him, while issuing commands in a calm, resonant voice that carried over the noise of battle.

Fenris hacked down a shriek that lunged at him. Blood splashed out, staining his armor. Fenris knew to keep his mouth closed when fighting darkspawn. He wiped sweat from his eyes with the back of his arm and kept on fighting.

The Archdemon screamed from its command post atop the tower, and a band of genlock archers gathered behind the melee. When the Archdemon screamed again, they loosed their arrows in a volley at Sten.

The golem fighting at the north gate, Rune, saw the volley coming, and instantly put itself in front of Sten. The arrows harmlessly rattled off the dense metal. Sten was rather startled at the golem's action, but the creature was there to protect them, after all.

"Come," he ordered Rune. "You... and you four," he gestured at Fenris and three of his Qunari, "will advance with me and deal with the archers."



She was a rope's length from the top. Bronwyn clung to the ledge, ornamented with scenes of Andraste's battles, and swung the grappling hook. To make sure she was not going to hit anyone else, she was forced to look down and about her.



THE RED QUEEN

Zevran was just a little below and to the the right of her. He saw her and edged away to give her room to swing her rope. He mouthed some words at her, but she was too far away to make them out clearly. She thought he was saying, "Wait for me!"

Brosca was also to her left, beyond Zevran and a little higher, hauling herself up sturdily with her dwarven upper body strength. She was totally focused on climbing, and Bronwyn did not try to catch her attention.

Riordan was not far below her. He had evidently been taking the climb in shorter increments, and something was wrong with his left arm. Ostap, to her left, was carrying on doggedly. Tara's face was white and scared. Bronwyn wished that Tara had learned a bird form, but the elf had a fear of heights, and birds were apparently alien to her magic. Bronwyn felt a wave of affection for Tara's loyalty in following her up here, not knowing how she was to get down.

For that matter, how are any of us getting down, with the darkspawn on the staircase? One by one, I suppose. Or... there's always the quicker way, right over the edge.

Her stomach knotted at the thought.

Stop it. You're here to do your duty, not to whine. A Cousland always does her duty.

With the noise of the rain, the thunder, and the Archdemon's furious screams, she could not hear her grappling hook land. She tugged at the rope, and it seemed to hold firmly. She tugged harder, and hoped that the Archde-

mon had not seen it. From the sound of it, it was still at the front of the tower, looking down on the battle below. Loghain was no doubt doing his damndest to rivet the Archdemon's attention there.

She looked up, and a flutter of black wings settled by the hook. The raven peered down at her, not daring even to squawk an encouragement. Surely if the hook were laid wrong, Anders would indicate it in some way. There was nothing else for it, so she swung out again, arms aching, and began slowing walking up the carved stones. A sculptured Andraste held her sword high, pointing the way to the victory.

The last bit was the hardest, and Bronwyn struggled to get a hand up over the wet stones at the top, A hand, and then the other, and then a leg, and she slid over the crenelation, nearly onto her face. Lightning struck the White Spire, a short distance away, and stone fell from the ruin. It made a tremendous distraction, which helped Bronwyn as she slunk away to the overdecorated structure that sheltered the top of the staircase. There was enough of a wall to hide in the shadows. She left her grappling hook in place. Riordan and others could use her rope to climb instead of having to swing their own up.

Bronwyn was more worried about Tara and Ostap. She crept further over, looking for them. Beside her, the shadows stirred, and Morrigan's yellow eyes gleamed at her from the darkness. The witch gave her an amused smile, which Bronwyn returned. Good. Someone's nerves were

still all they should be. It kindled a spark of hope that this crazy plan would work.

The Archdemon was getting restless. Something had drawn its attention further to the north. It was flapping its wings. Any moment it might take off and all the climbing would be in vain.

Brosca slid over the wall, and Bronwyn beckoned her over. The little dwarf's eye's lit up, and she slipped silently back to the wall where Bronwyn and Morrigan were waiting. Anders settled by them and transformed. Energy instantly shot through Bronwyn's veins. Anders shot a spell at Brosca, and got a grin and a whispered, "Thanks!"

Bronwyn leaned over the wall again. Not everyone was there. Perhaps Sigrun had given up and gone down, but where was Bustrum? She mouthed the name at Anders, who shook his head grimly, and raised his hand to show the number of the lost. Bronwyn ground her jaw, feeling vengeful.

Zevran was next, and then, in short order, Riordan. Anders pulled him completely behind the stairwell wall, so the light from the healing spell would not show. Ostap was getting close to the top.

She huddled close with her comrades, and whispered on a thread of breath. "As soon as Tara is up here, we've got to attack. When I give the signal – " She raised her hand and lowered it quickly, to show them " – I want you to hit the Archdemon with the most powerful freezing spells you can. Hold it in place, and we'll jump on it and

get our anchors in. We can't wait for anyone else."

Riordan whispered back, equally softly, "We must shred the creature's wings. It cannot be allowed to escape."

"All right. You go for the wings. Zevran, help him. There's no way a wing wound could be considered lethal."

Riordan raised his brows, not pleased at Bronwyn's lack of discretion. She whispered, "Everyone knows that only a Warden can kill an Archdemon! It's no secret! Anyway, I'll go for the brain. Here's Ostap. Let's get Tara off his back."

Tara was trembling with stress as they pulled her over the wall. Zevran took her in his arms and gave her a kiss and a whispered endearment. Anders gave her a restorative potion to guzzle down. Ostap sighed with relief, and managed to climb over on his own. Quickly, Bronwyn whispered the plan to them. The Archdemon was restless and alarmed. Bronwyn might have panicked had she known that it was preparing to launch itself off the wall and attack the Grey Warden who were pouring through the bottleneck at the Gate of the Moon.

Instead, Bronwyn took a deep breath, dismissing all thoughts from her mind other than those that concerned fighting and killing the Archdemon. It was too late for regrets. Nor could she wait for Alistair and Leliana and the others, laboring up the tower. She slipped the spear-anchor from its sheath on her back, crept forward a few paces, crouched, and raised her arm. Beside her, Riordan, Zevran, Brosca, and Ostap waited, tense as leashed hounds.

She dropped her arm and sprang forward. Behind her, three powerful mages cast a freezing spell on the Archdemon, just as its wings were lifting for the first mighty downstroke that would carry it far away.

The frost on the rain-slickened scales turned the dragon's surface to ice. Bronwyn tried to vault onto the huge back, and slipped away. Riordan jammed his anchor directly into the Archdemon's side and triggered the spring. The prongs shot out and plunged deep into muscle.

"Thanks!" chirped Brosca, darting in between the two humans. She bounded onto the anchor and swung herself up, catching at the dangling strap of the anchor that Bustrum had left in the creature during the battle at the Place Reville. She hauled herself onto the Archdemon's back. Slipping and sliding, she moved along the creature's spine, choosing a good spot to plunge in her own anchor. Bronwyn burst out laughing. Riordan swore vividly.

Zevran was amused himself. "Ha!" He plunged in his own anchor, higher than Riordan's, giving a safer way up to the dragon's back. "*Con permesso*, my Queen," he said, giving Bronwyn a boost. Bronwyn threw a smile back at him, and was surprised at how sad he looked. Riordan was up immediately after, diving for the wing joint that Niall had damaged earlier. Zevran thrust up at the same target from below, his dagger slimy with the Wardens' most lethal poisons.

Being a bigger man, Ostap was a little slower than Riordan, but was still able to make it to the dragon's back and

deploy his anchor before the spell faded, and the dragon, not quite sure what had just happened, was suddenly conscious of a knifing pain in its left wing. It screamed out in surprise, and turned its head completely around, trying to see what was happening on its blind side.

It screamed again, horrified, when it suddenly realized how it had been tricked.

With a violent shudder, it tried to shake off the puny mortals that were crawling over its divine flesh. It lashed out with the huge tail, smashing the tower wall, sending stones tumbling that crushed darkspawn and soldiers alike. Zevran's dagger was stuck in its joint, and as the assassin attempted to pull it free, he was struck by a front leg, and nearly sent over the side of the tower. Tara shrieked, running to him, casting a life-draining curse at the Archdemon's hideous head. She caught Zevran by an ankle, and pulled him back from the brink.

Anders tried a freezing spell that caught Ostap along with the dragon. Morrigan, more cool-headed, lay down a paralysis glyph, which while elegant, delayed the dragon only briefly. It was enough time for Riordan to buckle his strap and brace himself against the left wing. Bronwyn vaulted past Brosca, despite the dwarf's protests, and clambered higher on the bony neck ridge, gripping it with her thighs as she would a horse. Ostap had gone for the right wing and wrapped the strap around his left arm. Brosca clung to two of the anchors, tying the straps together as

the wings came down, and the Archdemon leaped from the top of the Cathedral tower.

Tara and Zevran held each other fast, both glad to be alive, but anguished at this latest development. Tara whirled, and shouted at Anders and Morrigan.

"What's the matter with you? Go after them! Go after them!" She rushed at them, waving her arms, and shoed them away like chickens. Indignant, Morrigan took to the skies, screeching at Tara, who gestured back at her in the rudest possible way. Anders was aloft a second later, with an uneasy look back at Tara. Both birds took off after the Archdemon, which was flying slowly and unsteadily, both its wings injured.

At that moment, Alistair was over the top, his face covered with blood, looking about him in bewilderment. He was followed a moment later by Darach, by Quinn, and then by Carver. Minjonet and Leliana had some way to go. Others were still only two-thirds to the top.

"Where's the Archdemon?" Alistair demanded, as if it would suddenly reveal itself behind an ornamental vase.

"Gone," Zevran told him. "And our lady with it. Riordan, Brosca and Ostap are with her, and Morrigan and Anders are flying behind."

Alistair took a threatening step forward, fist cocked to punch the assassin.

"Alistair! Don't!" Tara cried. "It's not our fault! They've gone and left us!"

A furious, frustrated tremor, and then Alistair exploded. "Right! I've just about had enough of this!"

Tara jumped back, wide-eyed. She had never seen Alistair lose his temper before.

He wasn't done.

"I'm going to kill some darkspawn. Lots of darkspawn. You can stay here if you want. I don't care."

With that, he turned smartly on his heel, and headed to the door, shoving the urns and Blighted flowers of the barricade aside. He drew his sword, and headed for the top of the spiral staircase.

It seemed the only thing left to do. Without a word, the rest followed him.



Bronwyn watched the teeming courtyard below drift away like a passing vision. The noise of battle was muffled by the tremendous downstrokes of the Archdemon's wings. It dipped its head, and Bronwyn's stomach lurched. She clung to the neck ridge, almost panicking. The swarms of warriors and archers, the flashes of the mages' spells were tiny and far away. In the midst of them was a little figure in shining silver armor that paused, looking up at her. Loghain was watching her fly away.

That's right. I promised him we'd see one another again. I didn't think it would be like this. Not like this. I imagine he'll think I've been terribly stupid, after all. And poor Scout!

Look! There was Sten at the compound gate with a

golem. His men were putting up a good fight. Bronwyn hoped he'd find his precious Tome. And farther away, she could see over the very city walls. Warriors were pouring in through the north gate, and they were not darkspawn! They must be Hector Pentaghost and the rest. What a pity she would never have the chance to give the First Warden a piece of her mind. Useless twit.

The Archdemon shrieked, faltering. Bronwyn saw that Riordan had torn a great hole in its wing with his spear. The Archdemon swooped and struggled, trying to shake them off. It swerved, bellowing, and headed east, toward the harbor and out to sea.

The rain had almost stopped. A light drizzle misted the sky around the dragon. Dark waves glittered below, where the lights of Isabela's little fleet shone faintly. The dragon dropped down, almost skimming the surface of the water.

The flight smoothed a little and Bronwyn buckled the strap of her anchor to her belt, and then used the loop to safely slip up higher on the neck. The Archdemon hated that, and twisted its neck, trying to snap at her. She was too close to the head. Instead, it saw Ostap, who was trying to gain enough purchase to take another swing at the right wing joint. With a roar, the Archdemon bit at him, and a fang tore through his anchor strap. The big Avvar tumbled into the water with a wild shout.

Triumphant, the Archdemon lifted its head and soared up at a sliver of moon visible through the breaking clouds.

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It flapped its injured wings, trying to gain altitude, its flight nearly vertical. Brosca's grip on her straps began to slip.

"Boss!" Brosca called. "Boss!"

Brosca's round little face was white in the dim moonlight, and it suddenly grew smaller and smaller, as she fell away toward the waiting sea.

"Brosca!" Bronwyn's cry was lost in the rushing wind. Now only Riordan and she were left.

No... not so. She saw a flutter of wings to her left, and the pale feathers on the underside of a hawk's wing caught the moonlight. To her right was a raven, farther away, wary of the Archdemon's good eye. At least there would be witnesses.

She slipped further up the long neck, nearly tipping over, and found herself close to the head. She could grab at the horns to steady herself, and slipped over another bony spine. The Archdemon shook its head, enraged, and then screamed, as Riordan managed to stab at the base of its wing, striking a nerve.

Its flight was unsteady now, and it banked sharply, heading back to land, not risking itself to the sea. Bronwyn's stomach lurched again, violently, and she turned her head and was sick, losing her poor last meal from the Place Reville. It was unspeakably vile. She had no idea if Riordan was still with her or not, but it must be all he could do not to fall. She wiped her mouth with the back of her gauntlet, and tasted Archdemon ichor. It was even worse than the vomit.

They straightened out once more, and passed over

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the plain to the north of the city. Bronwyn glanced at it, impressed. Someone had done a great deal of siege-work here. It was quite the sight. She remembered the vision in which the kingdoms of the earth had been spread out before her. Now she seemed to see that same vision with her living eyes, but truly the only kingdom that mattered was the kingdom within: the strength she could wield to master her fear and do her duty. She slipped forward over the last ridge and pulled her spear, her dragon-killer, from its sheath on her back.

A sob broke from her, thinking of all she must leave. She pressed the tip of the spear to the exact spot at the back of the brain, and sobbed again, her throat burning.

"Goodbye!" she cried. "Goodbye!"

And then she thrust the spear home with all her strength.



CHAPTER 25

A HERO OF
OUR TIME

HOUSANDS WITNESSED THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE ARCHDEMON OVER THE RUINS OF VAL ROYEAUX. Most could make

out the tiny figures on the dragon's back. Those with spyglasses, like First Warden Wildauer and Hector Pentaghost, could see the red armor worn by the Warden on the dragon's neck, riding the creature like an ancient hero. They could see the glitter of the spears in the Wardens' hands. It was the most astonishing sight they had ever seen or ever would see.

A few Tevinter mages remained posted on their lookout mound, disgruntled at being left behind. Now they were glad to be in a prime position to observe the Archdemon's demise. They even saw two of the Wardens tumble into the sea.

"Bad luck!" cried one of them, younger and more empathetic than the rest.

His friend shrugged. "Maybe they can swim, Julian."

"I hope so! Imagine riding a dragon, Vyraco!" babbled the young mage. "I hope they live to tell about it."



Those remaining at the top of the tower now had to find a way to get down again. Between them and their friends on the ground was a spiral staircase of iron and bronze held by darkspawn.

Tara had a sudden inspiration. She rushed after Alistair, yelling "Stand back!" and released a blue-white bolt of lightning.

It sizzled down the staircase, curving, curving in an elegant helix; electrocuting nearly all of the darkspawn there. Tainted bodies jerked and shuddered away. Some remained in place, dead bodies rigid, eyes bulging, smoke rising from the top of their heads.

"Good job!" Alistair shouted, impressed. He and Carver knocked dead darkspawn aside as they raced to the bottom. Not all were dead, though, and they fought back savagely. The smoke of the burnt darkspawn obscured the way. Blades slashed out of nowhere; arrows whistled past.

Zevran laughed fiercely as he drove a dagger into a hurllock. His laugh was cut off by an arrow in his throat. It went all the way through, the bloody barb coming out the back.

Tara shrieked at the sight. Zevran's eyes were wide and astonished, as he groped at the bright blood trickling from the wound. Abruptly, he sat down on a step, and managed to give Tara a shocked, ironic smile. Minjonet was just behind him and caught him as he toppled back.

"Créateur!" cried the Orlesian. "In the throat! That means death!"

"No, it doesn't!" Tara shouted back. She fumbled in her breastband for a small packet, and then shouted at Min-

jonet. "Break off the barb! I'll pull it out! Do it!"

Minjonet shook her head, but snapped off the barb. Tara yanked out the rest of the arrow, ignoring Zevran's horrible gurgle and the jet of blood that followed. Instead, she grabbed him by the jaw and forced all she had left of the Ashes of Andraste into his mouth.

"Swallow!" she yelled. Then she rifled ruthlessly through his clothes, until she found his own pouch. Only a little remained. "This, too!" she insisted.

The result was startling. All the fighters paused on the steps, disbelieving. At one moment, Zevran was choking to death on his own blood. In the next, the wound was closed, and Zevran was covered in blood, but quite healed.

"My Warden!" he gasped, awed and grateful. He seized her bloody, filthy hand, and pressed a fervent kiss to it.

"All right!" Tara shouted at her staring comrades. "It was all we had left of the Ashes of Andraste! Only the Grand Cleric has any, so nobody get hurt. Don't ask me any questions! Let's go!"

Oddly, the loss of the Ashes made her happy. She felt as if a great burden had been lifted from her. She yodeled out a war cry, firing off spells at the last of the darkspawn.

They were almost to the ground when a shock wave shook the tower, making them stumble. Alistair got out the door first. They were just in time to see the huge churning fireball to the north. Under the stars, a dragon fell from the sky, spewing the last of its fire, and the fireball dissipated slowly into dark smoke, hiding the stars.

"Bronwyn!" Alistair shouted, echoed by Tara, almost simultaneously.

By this time all the darkspawn in the cathedral courtyard were dead. More lurked in the compound itself: in the Cathedral itself, in the sullied gardens, in the scriptorium, in the dormitories. They would be hunted down eventually. Nor were all the Broodmothers dead. There were more nests: in deep chambers under great mansions, in the dungeons of the Palace, and further down, down, in the Deep Roads, where many of the captives had been dragged.

But at that moment, no one had anything on their minds but rushing out to see what had happened.

A shaft of unearthly light speared up into the heavens. It expanded into a gigantic white blossom that lit up the night sky like daylight. The boom that followed shook the walls of Val Royeaux.

"Oh," Athis murmured, gazing in awe. "That's what they meant by a 'bright light.'"

"It's... pretty bright," Pentaghast croaked. "Forget the darkspawn for now. We've got to see this."

Loghain did not wait for the end. He was already pushing ahead like a one-man battering ram, the route to the Gate of the Moon vivid in his mind's-eye.

"Out the way! Out of the bloody way! You! Sten! Get the golems, and let's get out there!"

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The dogs, not quite understanding what was happening, but comprehending fully that he was upset, ran at his side.

Sten grasped the urgency of the moment. "Golems! Form a wedge and force your way through."

The darkspawn melted before the golem's charge like butter, and fled to the north and south of the city, pressed on the other side by the Northern Wardens.

Further down the Avenue they came across a wyvern saddle, and in it, spilled onto his side, was Duke Prosper. Loghain could not be bothered with him, except to feel a spark of fierce relief that he was gone. Some Orlesians carried him to the side of the street and left him to be recovered later. The charge went on. They met the Nevarran Wardens, and a brief cheer rose, as they pushed through the gate and out onto the plain.

Morrigan thought she had planned for every possible contingency; yet at this moment – a moment that should have been one of triumph – she felt her schemes unraveling. She had believed that her ritual would benefit all her friends, and prided herself on her cleverness. She had never expected Bronwyn to end up on the back of a dragon, flying high above the earth. Her friend would survive the death of the Archdemon: there was no way she could survive the subsequent fall. The Avvar fell off into the sea. A little later, Brosca slid away. Morrigan shrieked in frustration, flying ever faster to keep up.

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If only she had confided in Bronwyn! If only she had told her that she could both kill the Archdemon and survive. With a little prudence, Bronwyn would understand that she should disable the dragon; force it to land. She could then slay it and reap all the rewards. She might not like it, but surely, given time, she would see reason...

But Bronwyn did not *know* that she should force the dragon to land. Bronwyn expected to die either in the air or on the ground, and there was no way for Morrigan to inform her otherwise now. Anders would be angry: he would feel betrayed. Even though she trusted in her power over her lover, Morrigan did not relish the thought of the coming confrontation. For that matter, she was genuinely distressed that all these worthless Wardens had proved so ineffectual that Bronwyn must die to save the day.

That burst of emotion forced out a shrill "*cree!*" and she veered a little closer to the failing Archdemon, trying to think of some way to distract Bronwyn. Riordan was still stabbing at the dragon, bracing himself against the wing joint as he tried to pierce the hide. Let him perish!

Thus, she was dangerously near when Bronwyn's spear found the Archdemon's brain. Flemeth had not prepared her for what followed.

Light burst from the Archdemon's wound, as if a curtain had been drawn aside in a dark room. The light was dazzling; overwhelming. The birds were blinded by it.

It was the last thing Bronwyn saw. The Archdemon con-

vulsed, thrashing violently. In the resulting shockwave, Bronwyn was jolted forward, and the impact of the butt of her spear against her breastplate stopped her heart. The spear could not penetrate the dragon armor, and it bent away to the side, but the damage was done. Bronwyn was already dead and beyond pain by the time the Archdemon slammed into the earth. The creature's mass somewhat cushioned its riders' final impact, but more bones were broken. Bronwyn lay draped over the Archdemon's head, one arm extended, face turned a little to the side.

By a bizarre happenstance, Riordan survived, though badly injured, sprawled out unconscious on the vast wing. Anders ordinarily would have gone to him at once, but instead rushed to help Morrigan, who was critically injured.

The Archdemon's lashing tail had struck her a glancing blow, breaking a wing. The shockwave stunned her. Morrigan became groggily aware that she was plummeting to earth, and she fluttered desperately, crying out in pain. Her first impulse was to go to human form, and she had just enough sense left not to do it. Morrigan struck the earth at some distance from the Archdemon a few moments later. Anders was instantly at her side.

He had been shaken by the shockwave, too, but was farther away, and had managed to keep his head. Flying swiftly to her, he shifted back to human form and fell on his knees by the injured bird.

"Morrigan!"

He thought now that he had made a mistake with Niall, and would try another way with Morrigan. "I know it hurts, but let me set the wing first before you change. If you change with broken bones, you could do even more damage."

He busied himself, mending the bird's fragile bones, sick with guilt and unable to look at the awful calamity behind him. He cast a sleep spell on Morrigan, and when she seemed stable, he got hold of himself and turned to the wreck of the dragon. No one could have survived that. All of Morrigan's plots had been in vain.

He slipped off his tabard and set Morrigan carefully inside it, using it to carry her along with him. Closer to the dragon, he was startled to see faint movement. He walked a little faster, still careful with Morrigan's injuries. Already he could hear distant shouts, as the Wardens on the north side of the city came rushing from their fortifications and through the city gates to triumph over the defeated Archdemon.

He set Morrigan in the curve of a wing, and clambered up to see if anything could be done for Bronwyn, already guessing the truth. Feeling like a fool and a coward and a dupe, he gently felt for a pulse. He ground his teeth, and then tried again. Nothing. It was over. He turned away, and slipped down to see to Riordan.

What he discovered was the one good thing that happened that night.

The young Tevinter lookouts on the mound stared in

disbelief at the white light blooming from the dragon. The shock wave knocked them down. They staggered up, still not daring to believe their eyes as the creature hurtled to earth. It hit the ground behind the Warden lines.

The younger, Julian, managed to speak first, grabbing up a torch. "Come on! Maybe we can help them!"

"Nobody could have survived that!"

"I'm going. Bring a torch, Vyraco. We'll need some light."

"But we were supposed to stay here... Oh, all right, but I'm telling the Commander that it was your idea."

Some nearby grass had briefly caught fire from the dragon's last breath, but it was so wet that the fire could not spread. It cast a little light on the scene for the young mages. They pelted toward the Archdemon's body, and then halted at the sight of Anders, working hard on Riordan. They held up their torches, trying to see into the shadows.

"It's a Warden!" Vyraco shouted. "He's alive!"

"Someone survived?" Julian burst out. "That's amazing!" Seeing that Anders was a mage made him much more comfortable addressing an obvious foreigner. "I am Julian Merulus, and this is my friend Vyraco. How can we help?"

"You're Healers?"

Vyraco shrugged. "He is. I can do a little."

"All right." He pointed at the comatose Riordan. "We've got broken ribs here, and a punctured lung. A broken leg, a dislocated shoulder, some serious contusions. I'm hoping his brain isn't scrambled. Take your pick. I'm Anders, by the way."

Julian looked up to the still figure draped over the dragon's head.

"What about...?"

"She killed the Archdemon. She's dead."

Vyracus stood in nervous, respectful silence, and then hastily held up the torch for his friend.

"I'm sorry," Julian said softly, going to work on Riordan's injuries. "I mean... someone had to kill the Archdemon, but I'm sorry anyway. She looks young. Was she your friend?"

"My Commander. Bronwyn, Queen of Ferelden."

That got a reaction. Julian's concentration slipped for a second, causing Anders to hiss in anger.

"Sorry. That's *her*?"

It struck Anders then that Bronwyn really was dead. Gone. Grief nearly strangled him, and his eyes burned. Morrigan had *promised* she'd live. She'd *promised* that all their friends would be safe. He blinked, and cleared his throat.

"Yes. That's her. Watch how you talk about her."

"I don't mean any disrespect," Julian assured him. "It's just... we heard some amazing things. Some Orlesian noble left a copy of a White Chantry document in Cumberland." He whispered to his friend, "That's Andraste's Champion."

Vyracus craned his neck for a better look. "I heard she found Andraste's Ashes. Why didn't she use them?"

Anders was ready to explode.

"Because the bloody Chantry made her *use* her Ashes to prove they really were the Ashes." He subsided, exhausted.

"She healed a little girl. She didn't have any left for herself."

Vyracus whispered to Julian, "White Chantry idiocy." Then, embarrassed, he muttered, "Sorry," to Anders.

"You don't have to apologize to me. I hate the Chantry more than you can imagine. Bronwyn always stood up for mages. It's only because of her that mages have the freedom to serve in the army or run public clinics in Ferelden."

Julian focused on healing Riordan's fractured skull. Blue healing light glowed brilliantly in the darkness. Vyraco held the torches to help them work and noticed the bundle in the curve of the wing.

"Is that your hawk?" He asked Anders.

"Yes. Don't touch her. She was hurt in the blast."

The young Tevinter studied the hawk, politely not touching her, but clearly very puzzled and interested.

Julian gave his friend a look, which was not understood. He finally said to Anders, "When you're done here, you should get her —" he pointed at Bronwyn — "down from there before she gets stiff. I mean..." he hesitated at the burning look from the strange mage. "I mean, her people will want to see her... looking better. I can do it if you don't want to."

"Don't touch her, either. The King... her husband... isn't feeling very friendly toward Tevinters since he cleared out some slaver gangs in Denerim."

"We're not slavers!" Julian said, a little indignant.

Anders looked at him, bone-tired. "I think the Fereldan Wardens who recently had family abducted into slavery

would not see much difference between the merchants who sell their goods and the customers who buy them. I don't want to talk about it. Concentrate on fixing Riordan."

He had to argue again when the First Warden and the Warden-Commanders of Nevarra, Rivain, and Tevinter arrived. Anders had unbuckled Bronwyn from the dragon by then and laid her out more or less decently on the dragon's wing to keep her from the wet ground. She was already nothing like the Bronwyn Cousland he had known. In the moonlight she looked smaller and younger, and her broken bones made her bend in odd ways. He shut her eyes and folded her hands over her waist, but no one would mistake her state for sleep. It was harder than with a living body, but Anders cast a few spells to make her look more like herself, if only to spare everyone else's feelings. Quietly, he cast a preservation spell too. It would be a hundred times worse if the flies started buzzing around her.

Pentaghast had the good sense to send a runner to find King Loghain and break the news. The First Warden was very curious about Bronwyn, and touched her armor.

"It really is dragonbone," he murmured to an aide. When it appeared he might attempt to open her eyes to see how green they really were, Anders interposed himself.

"Sorry, First Warden. The preservation spells are in a delicate state."

It was an outright lie. The Tevinter Commander raised his brows and looked faintly amused. Anders sensed that

he had no particular respect for the First Warden, either. Pentaghost ordered some of his men to strap some spears together for makeshift litters. The wounded and the dead must be carried away with dignity.

Morrigan was looking a lot better, and had awakened. Anders talked to her like any man would talk to a favorite pet, warning her that they were not alone.

"There you are, girl. You're going to be all right. Just lie still and don't make any sudden moves. You might startle my new Tevinter assistants."

Morrigan creed softly, to show she understood. Under his terrible grief and anger, Anders still loved her, and was not about to betray her to the curiosity of these strangers.

Vyraco, who might regard elves and slaves as furniture, but was very tender-hearted toward animals of all kinds, took another look at her.

"So Fereldans like hawking too! I have a hawk at home, but I didn't bring her. I'm surprised your Commander let you."

Anders wondered how anyone could be this completely oblivious to the situation and to the feelings of others. His friend look a little embarrassed, or perhaps he thought Vyraco was being too forthcoming with a Fereldan barbarian. At least Julian was doing good work on Riordan.

"My hawk is really useful. She can deliver messages... and she understands anything you say to her."

"You must have trained her up a treat. Who's that coming?"

Anders sighed. "That's Loghain Mac Tir. This is his wife.

"I've got to go talk to him. You may want to stand back."

But Loghain had an iron grip on himself. He supposed he had always known how this would end. The world was peopled by fools and incompetents. Those few who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the common good were cheerfully allowed to do just that by the feckless, the lazy, the cowardly.

Loghain saw Anders working over a fallen warrior, and for a moment, against all reason, he felt a thrill of hope. That hope was crushed as he came closer and saw it was that bloody Orlesian, Riordan. Bronwyn was next to him, looking quite nice for a dead girl. He stopped, quite unable to say or do anything. There were groans and sobs around him, but they meant nothing to him. Then Scout dashed at Bronwyn, sniffed at her, and lifted his head in a howl so terrible, so utterly forlorn that Loghain lost control.

"Stop him! Stop him! Shut him up, you mages, or I swear I'll kill him here and now!"

Instantly, Jowan cast a sleep spell on the dog.

"It's done!"

The unbearable howling was cut off, and Scout slumped onto the dead, blighted grass.

Sten turned to a golem. "Carry him back to their headquarters. Carefully. He is a true warrior, and worthy of respect."

Loghain remained rooted to the earth, trembling a little. Tara dared to approach him.

"Let's take Bronwyn back, too," she urged. "We'll see to her there."

Loghain nodded, as if thinking of other things. Then he

frowned as too many strangers crowded close, wanting the honor of carrying the litter of the Slayer of the Archdemon.

"Let me carry her!" Jowan offered. He stumbled forward, and knelt before Loghain. "I'll change... and you can strap the litter to me. Everybody can see her, but nobody will be able to touch her. Please, Lord King. Let me do this."

Loghain looked at him a long moment, and then gestured to the side. The Fereldan Wardens backed away. Tara gave Jowan a nod and a strained smile. The transition from man to wyvern made the entire crowd draw back in awe.

And so Bronwyn was lifted to the wyvern's back, and the litter made fast. And Loghain stalked back to the city, Bronwyn on her strange and magical bier behind him.

"Stay!" the First Warden said to Anders, who had taken Morrigan up again in his tabard. "We have much to discuss! Ferelden will need a new Warden-Commander."

Adaia stepped forward, her little elven face battle-hard. "Tomorrow. We'll talk *tomorrow*. You'll want to finish looting the Archdemon, I expect. We need time to sleep... and grieve."

"And so do we," said Pentaghast, his voice gentle. "I shall see that our Fereldan brothers and sisters are given their due."

Adaia hoped he would, but was more interested in being with her friends at the moment.

While the Wardens of Tevinter and Weisshaupt swarmed over the Archdemon, draining the precious blood from the corpse, Riordan was carefully carried from the field

by his Orlesian comrades, under the watchful care of the young Tevinter mages. Julian proved to be an expert Healer, and clearly thought nothing too good for a Warden who had ridden on the back of an Archdemon. Riordan was still unconscious, but Anders had made a good start on him. Julian was hopeful for a complete recovery, and told Anders so, when he sought him out later.

"He'll need a lot of sleep. When he wakes," the boy sighed, "he'll learn that's it's all over. Was he a good friend of your Bronwyn?"

Anders paused, about to tell the Tevinter sharply that she had hardly been "his" Bronwyn; but then he thought he understood. National heroine. Andraste's Champion.

I suppose she's now officially "our" Bronwyn.

"Yes. He was. Sort of a mentor, I suppose. She always thought well of him. Anyway, he was up there, fighting beside her, and that counts for something."

The boy drew closer. "But *you* weren't on the dragon, were you? I didn't see you there. How did you get to them so quickly?"

Anders shook his head. "I really can't say..."

The boy lowered his voice. "Was it *teleportation*?" he whispered. "Have you mastered teleportation in the far south? We have heard that the ancient elves had devices that allowed them to travel over great distances, but the lore is lost."

"I don't know anything about teleportation," Anders said sharply. He was about to say more about Tevinters in general, when there were heavy footsteps coming nearer, and

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Shale appeared, carrying Astrid's body.

A crowd gathered, with more and more dwarves, and the events in the Cathedral became known. The nest under the Cathedral was destroyed, but Paragon Astrid and her party had perished. Others had been caught in the collapse. Shale had not been hurt, of course, and was able to clear some of the rubble and retrieve the Paragon, whom Shale had greatly respected.

The dwarves were quite devastated by the fate of Astrid. Much of the interest in the Archdemon and the dead Queen were diverted to other, more specifically dwarven interests. The Paragon must obviously be given to the Stone in Orzammar. The Archdemon had been slain, and thus the Blight was over and with it any obligations the dwarves had to the Grey Wardens. They must return to Orzammar as soon as the condition of their wounded permitted. Piotin Aeducan was about to seek out Loghain and tell him so, and then hesitated. Perhaps the next morning would be more... tactful.

Early the next morning, the Fereldan Wardens received a message that their senior leadership was to report to the First Warden as soon as possible.

Everyone was exhausted, of course. While there were still darkspawn in the city, they had been driven from the Place Reville, the Palace, the market, the cathedral courtyard, and the two major gate areas. The Avenue of the

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Sun was fairly secure, as long as one traveled with armed companions. Minimal guards kept occasional forays at bay. The darkspawn were leaderless and nearly imbecilic: that did not mean they were not dangerous.

And some of the Rivainni Wardens claimed to have seen another wyvern – a live one – in addition to the mangled corpse near the Gate of the Moon. This was attributed to darkness and strong drink, but it was entirely possible that there were still ogres lurking in the shadows.

The summons resulted in a brief, unhappy meeting at the house at the Place Reville. Those already up sent one of the new Wardens around the house to wake up the late sleepers. Alistair knew he must meet with the First Warden, and had unpleasant expectations.

"I won't let them make me Warden-Commander. It's just not on. Bronwyn made me an Arl, and I'll always be a Warden. Just not Warden-Commander."

"If not you, then who?" Leliana asked, feeling very tired. Silas, she had learned, had perished with Astrid. The Archdemon was gone from their dreams, which was a gift of the Maker, but her heart was broken with so much loss. "Astrid is gone, Brosca is gone, Danith is gone. Cullen is gone. And Bronwyn..." She took a deep breath, and swallowed hard. "So few of us are left from that Joining in the little hunting lodge in the mountains. And you *are* senior."

"I won't do it," Alistair insisted, pale but stubborn. "I've got Jader to take care of. I'd even stay on as Senior Warden in



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Jader, but I can't be Warden-Commander. Emrys, either, for that matter. He's got to be a bann. Look here: who's senior?"

"And who gets on with the King?" Aveline put in, very reasonably. "Whoever is Warden-Commander needs to be able to work with him."

"King Loghain likes Tara," said Adaia softly, holding hands with Siofranni. "He listened to her yesterday. I think Tara would be best."

Tara and Zevran walked in at that moment. Zevran was a shadow of his usual debonair self. He was doing his best to put up a brave front, but the effort was showing. Tara was tense and miserable. If Morrigan was going to lure Anders into a crazy, evil, blood magic ritual, she could have had the decency to see that it actually *worked*. For all her promises. Bronwyn was dead, along with all too many of their friends.

"I'd be best for what?" she asked.

"We're summoned to talk to the First Warden," said Alistair. "We've been discussing who we should put forward for Warden-Commander. I won't accept the job. You'd be great."

Zevran managed a wry grin and an elaborate bow. He filled bowls of a rather horrible-looking porridge for Tara and himself and brought them to the table.

Tara rolled her eyes. "I can just see that nomination going over well. Especially with the Tevinters."

Carver Hawke stopped eating long enough to put his chin on his fist, thinking. "Who cares what the Tevinters



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think? We'll probably never see any of these people again."

Tara shook her head. "People at home wouldn't like a mage in charge... 'ruling' over anything, you know. And Fereldans will like giving an elf a hard time. If Alistair won't do it, what about you, Leliana? You've been a Warden as long as I have."

Leliana did not even see that as a possibility. "Loghain does not like me. He never has. That will not change, now that his wife is dead in the land of his enemies, saving their lives."

That was all perfectly true, but the fact was that Leliana was considering staying in Orlais. She liked Riordan. Even more, she liked the Empress and her sisters and Prince Florestan. The happy time she had spent refurbishing Soldier's Peak seemed to have happened to someone else in another life. Now that Bronwyn was gone, she could never love Ferelden again. It was time to start over.

"Well," Tara said, "there's Anders..."

Carver snorted, and then muttered a good morning to Jowan as the mage slipped into the room. "Tara, only you would nominate Anders to be in charge of anything. Besides, *Morrigan* might not approve."

Alistair agreed. "Morrigan doesn't approve of much. She liked Bronwyn, though. At least she was able to be with Bronwyn at the end."

They were silent for a some time, eating, and finally Tara said, "Well, what about you, Carver? You're more senior than the Ostagar Wardens."

Aveline objected. "I think the Warden-Commander of

Ferelden should be at least twenty years old!"

Carver shot back, "It just so happens, milady Aveline, that I *am* twenty. Just," he added in a low voice. He was tempted. Being Warden-Commander of Ferelden was *something*. It was greater than being a mere 'Bann Adam' any day. "But I still think Tara would be better. She even has experience as a Senior Warden leading a unit."

"I think Tara would be best, too," Jowan murmured.

"All right," Tara said, thinking hard. "How about this? We'll go, and we'll give my name and Carver's name, and see who'll they'll go for."

"And if they try to give us a foreigner," Quinn spoke up from a corner, "We'll tell 'em that the King won't have it!" He had been very quiet since the deaths of Niall and Maeve.

There were some murmurs from the others in the room. Most were too tired and sad from the losses to trouble themselves. Darach had not spoken since they had returned last night, and Nuala and Steren were doing their best to look after him. The surviving dwarves had become very withdrawn since hearing of Astrid's death. And the loss of Bronwyn had the whole party feeling weaker.

"Who's going to go, then?" Tara demanded. "Alistair, you've got to go, so don't hide behind your bowl. Everybody who was a Warden before the big Ostagar Joining should go. That means somebody needs to get Anders... and so it's you, Leliana, and Anders. Then Adaia, Carver, Jowan, and me."

Quinn said, "Anders is whipped..."

Alistair added, "...in more ways than one!"

Everyone chuckled, but Quinn was not done. "...he was up until all hours taking care of Morrigan and the rest of the wounded."

"I know," Tara said kindly, "but this is really important, and he wouldn't like not to be consulted. Siofranni, go up there and roust him. While we're gone, I've got work for the rest of you."

There were groans, but people already seemed in better spirits, having a purpose again.

"Steren, take a patrol out and scout the perimeter of the Place Reville. Look for hidden darkspawn. Aveline: take a patrol to the Gate of the Sun, and make sure the way out of here is clear. I need a mage... you, Peder. I remember you from the Circle. After what we've been through, some of the soldiers must have got themselves Blight sickness. Look for signs. Try to enforce some cleanliness and safety standards. It's likely we'll be welcoming a lot of new Wardens pretty soon. We need to be ready. Don't alarm people, but talk to the other healers."

Alistair said quietly. "And we'll be having the funerals today."

"Right. They'll have the pyres for the soldiers and the Wardens here in the Place Reville. Bronwyn's pyre will be at sunset on the north side of the walls near the Archdemon. Here's a thought for today: nobody gets killed but darkspawn."

Loghain managed a few hours of sick, restless sleep, and awakened to the first full day that Bronwyn was dead.



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He would have to get up and see her laid out on her bier, knowing that she would never fight or talk or laugh again. She would never lose her temper or toss a goblet of wine his way. She would never kiss him again. Everything that was Bronwyn was gone, only the Maker knew where.

He had lost women he loved before, but this loss had its own special poignancy. She was, he was certain, the last woman who would ever be in love with him. For the first time in his life, he felt... old. Barren years of duty stretched out before him, lonely and uninviting.

Then he was informed that Piotin Aeducan wished to speak to him. No matter what the heartbreak, it seemed that there was always work to be done.

"I'll be there directly," said Loghain.



The Wardens' Council declared that Riordan, as soon as he recovered, would be the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. No one questioned it; no rival claimant was proposed. His deeds spoke for themselves.

In contrast, Tara's nomination for Fereldan commander was received by First Warden Wildauer with a signal lack of enthusiasm. With the exception of Tevinter, where a mage always ruled the Wardens, it was considered more tactful for the position to be filled by a notable warrior who would be better able to mix with the nation's elite. Being an elf did not much help the situation either: the Tevinters would not support an elf, and wondered why



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Anders, handsome and capable, and whom many of them had met, was not putting himself forward.

"I'm a Healer, not a leader," he said. "I like being a Warden, but I don't want to deal with nobles and try to think of strategy. Tara's a lot better at that. That's why Bronwyn made her a Senior Warden and gave her an independent command."

For that matter, nearly everyone had been immensely impressed by Jowan's transformation, and thought that such a powerful — *human* — mage would be a far better choice.

"I've made serious errors of judgement in the past," Jowan said. "Tara has saved me from them more times than I can count. She has my complete support. And she can shape-shift into a wyvern, too, for that matter."

Alistair was clearly senior, but he absolutely refused. Perhaps if someone he personally admired, like Riordan, had been there to urge him; or if Loghain had commanded him, it would have been different. But these strangers meant nothing to him, and he did not care about their good opinion. Leliana told them frankly that she was not Fereldan enough to be acceptable. No one even considered Adaia for a moment. The little elf smirked coldly. She wondered if any of the Tevinters here had bought friends of hers on the slave market.

Pentaghast had met both Jowan and Carver. He thought Carver a very nice young man, with a great deal of potential, but considered him far too young. Visconti and Sainsby had seen them all fight, and had good things to say about Carv-

er's prowess, but they agreed that he needed some experience in command, and perhaps another ten years, before he was ready to undertake such a demanding position.

"Your King may disapprove," the First Warden warned Tara.

Alistair disagreed. "Loghain likes Tara. He always has. He's not prejudiced against mages or elves. He thinks she's competent, and he doesn't think that about most people. And she was Bronwyn's friend. He'll be fine with it."

They returned to their headquarters to find the pyres nearly ready, and with one thing to be glad about.

"Ostap's back!" Quinn shouted. "He's alive!"

The Avvar was in good shape, but in borrowed clothes, since his leathers were being carefully dried.

"I did not have far to fall, and I swim well. I found the woman captain's ship and they took me aboard." Gravely, he added. "I have heard that Bronwyn chose glory before length of days, as in the tales of old."

"She did," said Alistair, remembering Bustrum's story with a shiver.

Tara asked, "Did you see Brosca? Did she make it, too?"

The Avvar shook his head, his face drawn with grief. "She was a great warrior, but she could not swim."

Dead trees and ruined houses had contributed to the pyres in Place Reville. Duke Prosper was laid on one, his identity unknown, wearing only his smallclothes, for looters had divested him of his magnificent armor, his plumed helmet, his wyvern-hide boots, his jewels, and

even his silk handkerchiefs.

The Wardens had their own pyre, and Fereldans and Orlesians alike were laid on it. Quinn wept openly, as he laid Niall and Maeve side by side. More tears were shed for other comrades: for Cathair and Sigrun, for Bustrum and Clovis, for Nevin and Oghren and all the rest. They would all be burned here, all alike, whether human, elf, or dwarf, for there was no way to carry them either to a green wood or return them to the Stone in proper fashion.

Astrid, indeed, was going home to Orzammar. Her body had been preserved by spells, and was now in the half-empty explosives wagon, wrapped first in looted silk and then in canvas. She would have a great state funeral, no doubt. The dwarves and the Legion of the dead were ready to go, but agreed among themselves to attend Queen Bronwyn's funeral out of respect. After that, nothing would persuade them to remain on the surface.

Some had slept through the past several hours, and were awakening to a new world.

"Riordan!" said Jowan. "How do you feel?"

The Orlesian blinked and realized that he was still alive. It was somewhat... disappointing.

"Better than I have any reason to expect. The Archdemon?"

"Dead."

Reluctantly, Riordan forced himself to ask, "Bronwyn?"

"Dead. You only survived because Anders was there and

could tend to you immediately. You were pretty banged up. You should be fine, but you need a lot of rest — ”

Minjonet appeared at his side. “We thought we’d lost you!”

“It would seem not. What’s happening?”

“The darkspawn are scattering. Everyone was too exhausted to pursue them last night. The pyres will be lit for the Orlesian and Fereldan dead here in Place Reville. The Queen’s funeral is at sundown.”

“I must be there!”

Minjonet looked at Jowan to forbid it, but Jowan sympathized with Riordan.

“We’ll see that you’re up to it. I’ll have someone get you something to eat, while Minjonet gives you the news.”

Jowan stepped out of the room, and Riordan was aware of bottomless, raging hunger. It seemed base and inappropriate. He, so close to his Calling, had survived, and Bronwyn, so young and with so much to live for, was gone. It was not something he ever said aloud, but Riordan had suspected for many years that the Maker had a cruel sense of humor.

“What else has happened?”

Minjonet pulled up a nearby stool and sat down at his bedside. “Well, it appears that Tara Surana will be the new Fereldan Commander, and *you* are the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. It’s official. The First Warden said...”

Another awakening took place after the Warden’ Council. Once Anders carried Morrigan back to the compara-

tive safety of the Wardens’ headquarters, he found a small room — hardly more than a closet with a window — for his private use, and there Morrigan transformed and spent many hours in a healing sleep. Anders locked her in and left her during the meeting, but as soon as he returned, it was time to face her.

On awakening that morning, he had checked her signs, of course, and was relieved to see that the bones were knitting well. Between his magic and her own, she should heal rapidly and be on her feet by the following day. He returned from the meeting to find her awake and nearly hysterical. Her magic had told her at once that something had gone disastrously wrong.

“I have *miscarried!*” she shrieked, her face twisted in an ugly rictus of fury and disappointment.

“How can you know?” he asked. “It’s too early — ”

“I *know!*”

Something to do with the ritual, then. Anders looked at her anxiously. At this stage, at least it would not have harmed her physically.

“Morrigan, sweetheart,” he said, stroking her face. “You were hurt really badly. I got to you first thing, but there was nothing I could do. We can always have another child — ”

She clutched her temples in world-crushing despair. “You *fool!*”

Words were said for the dead in Place Reville, and by noon the pyres were aflame. Bronwyn was laid out in her

armor in a make-shift bier in front of Loghain's headquarters. Her helmet, her weapons, and her dragon horn were displayed on a stand. Leliana had spent some time on her face and hair. Aeron played his lute quietly nearby. Loghain stood at the head of the bier, his eyes fixed on Bronwyn's still face, committing every feature to memory.

The army, the Wardens, the dwarves, the Dalish, the mages, even the Orlesian chevaliers lined up to pass by in farewell. For some, this was the first opportunity they had ever had to see her close to.

Merrill whispered to Lanaya, "Doesn't Bronwyn look pretty? It's such a shame. I always liked her..."

Scout crouched next to Bronwyn's bier, whimpering and shivering. There was no comforting him: he snapped at those who approached him, and even growled at Loghain. Only his fellow mabari were welcome.

The First Warden ordered one of his staff, a gifted artist, to draw Bronwyn. After taking some sketches now, he would paint a portrait of her as she appeared in life, to be hung in a place of honor at Weisshaupt Fortress. Discreetly, the artist consulted Leliana about the exact shade of green to use for her eyes. Loghain was irritated, but others courteously approached him with the request to represent the scene.

"Why not?" he growled. "You might as well get it right."

There was a stir in the crowd, and a group of Orlesians approached, led by Prince Florestan. He carried a long object wrapped in cloth-of-gold. With some trepidation,

the Prince bowed to Loghain.

"Your Majesty," he said, his scarred face grave. "Nothing can express the gratitude of Thedas for this sacrifice. And yet, I wish to offer a token of my own regard. I pray you accept it. It was never ours, anyway."

He opened the wrappings, and revealed something remarkable.

Loghain, not much interested, frowned. "A sword!"

"It is Nemetos, the Sword of Calenhad, taken from King Venedrin of Ferelden in Blessed 8:24. I knew where it was kept in the Palace, and thought it a great dishonor to hoard it away from its rightful owner. Let it be a symbol of peace between us." With another bow, he offered the sword, hilt first.

Loghain considered punching the silly fellow's face. What did he care for the ancient sword of the Theirins, when Bronwyn lay dead? Cauthrien did not dare touch him, but he felt her steadying presence beside him, and mastered his first impulse. He took the sword and held it high, judging its balance. Maric had had a fine sword, too, but Loghain had never considered using it.

"The Sword of Calenhad," he murmured. "Too heavy for Loghain. Let the blood of Calenhad watch over it, until she is given to the fire."

The pommel was laid under Bronwyn's folded hands. It was a handsome sword, Loghain thought. The Orlesians had taken good care of their prize. It meant absolutely nothing to him personally, but all the same, he would

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take it home and have it displayed in a place of honor at the Landsmeet. If Fergus Cousland wished to bear it someday, that would be his own doing. No one else would hold that sword hilt but Bronwyn while Loghain lived.

To the north of the vast, already stinking corpse of the Archdemon was a broad, flat area that was deemed adequate for the Queen's funeral. The Wardens worked with a will. There was plenty of dead and Blighted wood to use for the purpose: at sundown, Bronwyn Cousland of Ferelden would be sent off in style. The pyre would burn, and in the early hours of the morning, her ashes would be collected and all who were not Wardens would depart.

Some sympathetic Orlesian Wardens searched the remains of the Grand Cathedral and found jars of sacred incense. It was added to the pyre to overcome the usual depressing smells. Many Orlesians believed that Bronwyn should be regarded as something of an Orlesian heroine. She certainly had not been bound by the small-minded prejudices of many of her countrymen. Boniface Clery was one of them. He had spoken to both Tara and Rioridan, and it was agreed that he would be reassigned to the Orlesian Wardens. It was for the best. Tara did not like the idea of punishing people by forcing them to be a Warden in a foreign land, and she did not think Boniface would ever be happy in Ferelden. She did the same with some of the Wardens they had picked up along their march.

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Others wished to remain with the Fereldans, especially the mages and the elves.

At sundown they gathered, thousands in their ranks, and watched the solemn procession to the pyre. Many admired the soldierly fortitude of King Loghain; others, like Berthold de Guesclin, thought him incredibly hard-hearted. With him were Arls Alistair and Wulffe, Banns Cauthrien and Emrys, his captains, the commanders of the dwarven forces, the Keepers of the Dalish, and, of course, the Wardens. Amber was with Loghain, and Magister and Lily with their own humans. Scout had become so difficult that Loghain knew better than to try to take him to the funeral. He was chained up, bewildered, furious, and barking, back at their headquarters.

The Qunari were there, however. Sten's stern demeanor was to be expected; but there was sadness, there, too. It was not the Qunari custom to treat the dead with ceremony. Once life was gone, the shell was something to be disposed of with due regard to public health and hygiene. Nonetheless, Sten thought this a remarkable occasion, worthy of consideration and meditation. If these *bas* needed elaborate trappings to focus their minds, so be it. He would have much to say about Bronwyn Cousland when he returned to Par Vollen. First, of course, he must find the Tome of Koslun.

With great care, Bronwyn had been prepared for the pyre. Leliana and Tara wanted to spare him, but Loghain insisted

on helping. They had removed her armor, washed her carefully, and since any linen would have to be filched from some dead Orlesian's bedchamber, Loghain had dressed her in the rumpled crimson gown in her pack. She would be a Red Queen to the end. Jowan, in wyvern form, once again carried her on his back. Alistair and Wulffe lifted the litter away and bore it up to the pyre between them.

The army had no priest. Those few with the Fereldans had been left behind beyond the Orne. The northern Wardens did not wish to quarrel with the Chantry on campaign, and none had come with them. Truth to tell, there were two priests among the Tevinter Wardens, but Elagabalus did not mention the men, quite correctly understanding that the offer would be neither appropriate nor appreciated. Nonetheless, the two priests stood back in the crowd and whispered their own prayers for one whom more and more were coming to believe had indeed been Andraste's Champion.

That was the word among the Wardens, anyway, and they would all take it with them to their homelands.

"— wasn't Andraste from Ferelden, like Bronwyn? Didn't Bronwyn have a voice that persuaded all to join her? Didn't she perish to bring hope to the world? Didn't she have the power of healing?"

Old Knight-Commander Greagoir was the closest thing they had to a proper cleric. He had fought hard in the battle, and was feeling all his years and more today. He recited a bit of the Chant of Light that Loghain wanted, since this had

been the text at the funeral of the Wardens after Ostagar.

"BLESSED ARE THEY WHO STAND BEFORE THE CORRUPT AND THE WICKED AND DO NOT FALTER.

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEKEEPERS, THE CHAMPIONS OF THE JUST."

The listeners were riveted. The mention of champions resonated with a growing legend. Greagoir went on:

*"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."

He stepped back, making way for Loghain.

Cauthrien and Wulffe had tried to make Loghain see reason, but he was determined to give this speech himself. He was in armor, and sheathed on his back was Bronwyn's personal sword, The Keening Blade. It suited him somehow, as if it were whispering secrets. It was a way of being close to Bronwyn, even now. Tara had talked him into a cup of wine and some bread sopped in it before coming, and he felt the better for it. He had plenty to say to these people.

"This pyre is for Bronwyn Cousland, Queen of Ferelden, who was worth the lot of you put together!"

Loghain stared out at the crowd, daring them to disagree, daring them to challenge him.

"Almost a year ago, Bronwyn Cousland gave a stirring speech for the Wardens slain in the first great battle of the Blight, fought at the ancient fortress of Ostagar. Some

of you were there with me. You won't have forgotten it. No one who heard her ever will."

His eyes sought out fellow Fereldans: Arl Wulffe, the red-eyed Alistair, the faithful Cauthrien.

"She knew then what the world was facing, and she never flinched, she never shirked, and she never stopped until she ended it. She did it without much help from the Grey Wardens outside of Ferelden or from the rest of Thedas, for that matter."

An uneasy murmur. Loghain's face set in a mabari-like snarl.

"Do you think she failed to notice the assassination attempts? The insults? The dismissals of her as a 'barbarian?' The leadership of the Chantry calling her a 'heretic' and doing everything they bloody well could to try to make her *fail*? Well, I'm here to tell you she didn't miss a thing. She knew how little you thought of her. She knew how much people wanted her dead. Anyone else would have done just enough to drive the darkspawn out of Ferelden — which she had largely achieved by the end of last year — and let the rest of Thedas rot. I would have: I admit it freely. I don't see that Ferelden owed anybody anything."

He was angry. He was angry, and contemptuous, and utterly bereft.

"I suppose I should play your games and be *diplomatic* and tell you how wonderful you've all been, but I'm a barbarian too, and not a bloody *liar*. Not one of you could be troubled to lift a finger when Ferelden was fighting

for its life. No, that's not fair — there was one: Riordan of Jader over there. Bronwyn thought a lot of him. He came to her in secret and gave her counsel when everyone else had their heads up their arses. In fact, Bronwyn got a letter from a *very* important Warden telling her to leave Ferelden to its fate and go to Orlais! You can imagine what she said about that. No, come to think of it, you probably can't, since she was a well-spoken noble, whatever you lot choose to think about Fereldans."

He frowned, and then paused for a moment.

"Bronwyn was a Cousland. I don't know how much that means to most of you. Maybe the Marchers understand. Maybe even the Orlesians. The Couslands were teyrns — that means 'prince' in the Common tongue — they were teyrns in the north of Ferelden long before we had a king. They have a saying: '*A Cousland Always Does His Duty.*' That's why she wouldn't stop as long as the Archdemon lived. She knew... she *knew*... that killing it was what mattered. She knew it was so important that she united all the peoples of Thedas together to fight it: humans, elves, dwarves, mages and Templars... yes, even you Qunari. She became Queen of Ferelden so she could direct the kingdom's full force toward her quest to end the Blight. In the end, that quest took her life.

"I'm taking her home tomorrow. It's time she had a rest. You Wardens will have your work cut out for you here, cleaning up the Broodmother nests and the darkspawn

bands. You call it the Thaw, she told me. It's all yours, though I'll tell you that Bronwyn thought you should be doing more to strike at the heart of the darkspawn down there in the Deep Roads. I'm told by Warden-Commander Tara that the Fereldan Wardens plan to do just that. We owe it our dwarven allies, after all, who lost their own Paragon fighting the Blight."

It was a token of respect to them, and was appreciated. Loghain was actually still very angry at Astrid for the heedlessness that had killed so many others. Perhaps she had killed a Warden who otherwise might have killed the Archdemon instead of Bronwyn. He would never know.

"I'm not one for quoting the Chant of Light, but there was a verse that Bronwyn used when she gave her funeral speech after the Battle of Ostagar:

*"LET THE BLADE PASS THROUGH THE FLESH,
LET MY BLOOD TOUCH THE GROUND,
LET MY CRIES TOUCH THEIR HEARTS.
LET MINE BE THE LAST SACRIFICE."*

The devout found this moving. Leliana's tears flowed freely. Loghain huffed a bitter laugh.

"But she won't be the *last* sacrifice, will she? Two more Old Gods sleep deep down under the surface, awaiting the day the darkspawn find them. There's always another Blight, another dragon to be slain, a plague of werewolves, or an invasion over the border. Every generation faces its own challenges. Bronwyn was the hero of our time, the

hero we needed at the moment, and once again the world — unworthy as it is — has been saved. So it's time to bid her goodbye, and try to deserve her. I think there are some Highever lads among us today, and perhaps they'll help me see her off in the old style."

He took the torch from Arl Wulffe, and lifted it high.

"Highever Hail to Queen Bronwyn! Hail!"

"*Hail!*" the soldiers roared. Alistair joined in, remembering that day at Ostagar, which now seemed long ago.

"Hail!"

"*Hail!*" Tara and the Fereldan Wardens took up the response.

"Hail!"

"*Hail!*" Thousands of voice roared it out, and left an echoing silence.

Loghain touched the torch to the pyre, which blazed up quickly, illuminating the onlookers with a lurid glow. He stood away from it, watching, not inviting anyone to speak to him. Amber sat close to him, concerned for her human.

It was a fine, big pyre, and with the help of the mages' spells, Bronwyn burned bright and hot before she crumbled into the blazing logs. The wind quickened, and the sparks danced up to Heaven. What drink they had was shared out, and so ended the Fifth Blight.

True to his word, Pentaghast saw that the Fereldans received their fair share of the spoils of the Archdemon. Kegs of preserved blood and bundles of hide and bone

were loaded onto Isabela's ships. A small amount was kept by Tara, for use on the march to Ferelden.

She, Riordan, and Pentaghast talked quietly together while the pyre burned. Sainsby, Visconti, and the Rivainnis were having their own passionate discussion about what they intended to do about Kirkwall and the Felicissima Armada. Under the cover of that louder conversation, the other three made plans.

Pentaghast was remaining here for the foreseeable future, as was Riordan. Both Orlais and Nevarra had the greatest stake in clearing the remains of the horde from the Blight Lands. There were obviously other nests here in the city, and the Wardens would use poison and bombs to prudently destroy them.

"The operative word," Riordan remarked, "being 'prudently.'"

Then too, though no one spoke of it aloud, there was the magnificent loot of Val Royeaux. The city would be Tainted probably until the next age, and only Wardens would be able to sift through the rubble in safety.

"We will be expected to pay some percentage to the Empress," said Riordan, "but the Wardens will keep a great deal."

"Bronwyn promised Sten he could have the Tome of Koslun, if he could find it," Tara reminded them.

"He is welcome to it," said Pentaghast, with a shrug. "It seems fair. The Qunari fight well."

"And eventually," Riordan said, "We will probably learn that first hand. For now, however, let them go in peace."

"Loghain's leaving tomorrow as early as possible," Tara said. "I'm going with him. We'll clear out the darkspawn to the Orne. The Dalish will be with us. They all need Wardens for the ones who turn out Blighted. Besides, we've got to get back home eventually. There are still darkspawn in the south and west of Ferelden. There's something you need to know, though, before we leave, and you can pass it on to the First Warden and the others: one of our Wardens came up with an improved Joining potion. I know that Bronwyn wanted to share it as soon as our more *pressing* problems were resolved."

"An improved potion?" Riordan asked. "What does it do?"

"More people survive the Joining, for one thing. We've tried it, and we've had a *lot* fewer deaths. Now's the time to use it, with all the soldiers exposed to the Taint."

The two men glanced at each other, intrigued and hopeful.

"And it may..." Tara hesitated, not sure how much was the potion, and how much Avernus' powerful Blood magic. "It may prevent the Calling, or delay it. It works on people who have already Joined too, because we all took it with no ill effects. I'll write down the formula for your mages."

"That sounds..." Pentaghast gestured his wonder. "like a brilliant idea."

The Antivans, Orlesians, Nevarrans, Rivainnis, and Marchers were quite elated at the news. The Wardens of Weisshaupt and Tevinters did not seem all that impressed. Instantly, Pentaghast suspected that they had already had some such improvement, and had not troubled to inform

the rest of the order. First Wardens typically stepped down on their thirtieth year of service, but no one had ever heard of a First Warden going to Orzammar for his Calling. He had assumed that they had another entrance to the Deep Roads further north, but perhaps there was another, more infuriating explanation.

He came back from those brief conversations very unsettled, and then asked Tara more about the invention of this potion. The pretty elf mage took a deep breath, and then began to recount the adventures of a very old and terrible Warden by the name of Avernus.

The farewells were made that night. Some were quiet and tender; some were violent and raucous. In the Place Reville, at the Palace, and in the Imperial Market desperate, ferocious looting raged from cellars to garrets. Soldiers begged Wardens to go with them while they pillaged, promising them an extra share to make sure the riches they took were safe. Had it been any place other than Val Royeaux, Loghain would have given strict orders to respect property and keep discipline. But Loghain stayed with Bronwyn's pyre until the last fiery glow was extinguished, and did not care what his men did here. In his opinion, they deserved all the plunder their packs could hold. More coin circulating meant greater prosperity at home. For that matter, Cauthrien's men had found some remarkable treasures in the devastated Grand Cathedral. Loghain wasn't giving a copper to

the bloody Orlesians. His own share would go to build the cathedral Bronwyn wanted for Denerim. OUR LADY OF THE SACRED ASHES sounded like a good name to him.

Tara approached Loghain carefully. The man was swaying on his feet, and she was concerned for him.

"The fire's nearly out, Your Majesty," she told him. "Instead of letting it cool tomorrow, why don't I use a freezing spell right now, so you can collect the ashes? Then you could get some sleep."

Wulffe was worn out himself, and grateful for the suggestion. "That's kindly thought of, Warden. Loghain, listen to the girl. It's a sound plan."

"Do it," Loghain croaked out.

They had no proper urn, but a tin arrow chest would serve. Tara led the mages in casting the spells, and very quickly, the white ashes were cool enough to sort through. Loghain wanted to do it all himself, but knew he was being ridiculous, and let his friends help him. It was painful, as this duty was always painful, but it was an important part of accepting the death of a loved one.

Before dawn, the dwarves had packed up and gone, taking their wagon and their Paragon with them.

Merrill told Tara that the Dalish would travel with the Feredan Wardens and the army. It was a sensible decision. Though the Keepers had urged their people to be careful, there were those who had contracted the Blight sickness, and no doubt others would show signs, given time. If they did, they would simply Join

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the Wardens, and continue the journey back to Ferelden.

For there was no use in going anywhere else. The elves were safest with their Fereldan friends. While they had been met with condescending politeness by the First Warden, there was no indication that a new friendship had been forged between men and elves in general. Some of the Orlesian Wardens had been grateful, but it was unlikely that would be the general consensus in the Empire. It was wisest and safest to remain with the army until they reached the Fereldan border, which was now west of Jader. Then the Dalish would go their way: to their new lands in the kingdom. Some, at least, would go farther.

Irving and Greagoir, baffled by their own survival, gathered their people. Going home seemed utterly anticlimactic, but they could think of nothing else to do.

Thus the Fereldans and their allies broke camp, stuffing their packs with Orlesian plunder and putting the Blight Lands behind them.

The First Warden watched these preparations from a distance, quite relieved.

"A difficult man, that Loghain," he remarked to Elagabalus. "Quite capable, though."

"Impressive. The Fereldans were impressive throughout the Blight," Elagabalus remarked. "Perhaps our understanding of the country was outdated."

"I would be the first to admit that I underestimated the Girl Warden. A pity I never met her," he said, with palpable insincerity.

Elagabalus was not afraid of Wildauer, and replied with

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a skeptical smirk

"Oh, very well. It's true," the First Warden admitted. "She was a very inconvenient young woman, but she did the job in the end. I'll grant her that. Loghain has insisted on taking her ashes back to Ferelden, instead of surrendering them to us. We shall have to be satisfied with a suitable monument to her."

He was actually quite annoyed about the ashes. As soon as Loghain was gone, the relic-hunters had come out in force, wanting to collect a pinch of Andraste's Champion for themselves. The First Warden had spoiled their fun by posting a guard and having his people collect a reasonable amount of the wood ash that remained. Some of the girl might be mixed in. Who could tell? Ashes were ashes. No doubt, other Ashes of the Champion would trickle into the markets of northern Thedas eventually. In due course, Wildauer would see that his own siftings were interred in the splendid tomb for the Slayer of the Archdemon that he had commissioned as soon as the Blight began.

Three soldiers had already come to the Warden headquarters, admitting even to themselves that they were Tainted. One of them was a sergeant named Tanna, who was considered the finest camp baker in the Fereldan army. She was actually not at all unhappy at the prospect of being a Warden. The others were at least resigned.

Tara found being in charge helpful. She had something to focus on; something that helped her ignore the great

gaping holes in her heart. Loghain seemed fine with her being the Warden-Commander. No one seemed put out. That would probably change, she acknowledged, once they were back in Ferelden. For now, there was no problem.

That did not mean that she was happy with all her people. She knew that Morrigan had been injured, but Riordan had been hurt as badly, and still had come to Bronwyn's funeral. Morrigan had not. Tara thought that fairly outrageous. And now Morrigan was late mustering for the departure.

"Anders, where's Morrigan?" she asked. "Is she coming or not?"
 "Go easy on her, Tara," Anders pleaded. "She's suffered a loss."
 "Does that make her *special*?"

Tara instantly remembered Bronwyn speaking those words, and the immediacy and finality of death made her choke. Yes, Bronwyn had spoken those words, but she could not remember where or when.

Anders was angry in his turn. "She lost the baby, if you must know. I can't tell, but she can. Something to do with the ritual. She's heartbroken."

Tara left the harsh words on the tip of her tongue unsaid. She even kept the smile from her lips. This was wonderful news. The Old God Urthemiel was well and truly gone from the world. She must tell Zevran right away.

"I'm sorry you've lost your child. It's very sad," she forced herself to say.

Your child, she thought, whose true soul you were willing to drive out to make room for a monstrous being that might have

well have proved worse than the Blight. Morrigan did not want to be Flemeth's vessel, but she was perfectly willing for her child to be a vessel for some creature that she hoped would share its power. Oh well, she was likely under geas. That's over.

"Yes... well..." Anders said, his flash of anger soothed. "I told we could have other children. She's not ready to find that comforting. She'll be along."

Morrigan joined them soon, in fact, carrying a bag of odds and ends they had found about the mansion. Tara thought she looked unwell: her skin sallow, her eyes dull, seeming much older – even past thirty. It occurred to Tara that Morrigan might well be older than she had always thought. Magic – and Morrigan's was currently at a low ebb, apparently – could mask age to a surprising degree.

Tara whispered the reassuring news to Zevran, who gravely nodded, discreet in his satisfaction. It would not be necessary to poison the witch, after all. Others were not so restrained. Leliana shot Morrigan a very hostile look, and Alistair pointedly ignored her. They had noticed her absence from the funeral.

Prince Florestan and his chevaliers were leaving, too. Riordan had urged the Prince to leave as soon as possible, wanting him to reduce his chance of contracting the Taint. The prince would go to Val Foret, and then travel around Lake Celestine to Montsimmard to spread the news of the end of the Blight. Then he would ride to the border to escort the Empress back home. A brief conference with Loghain gave him some assurance that there would be no difficulty

about Celandine. The Fereldan, however, pointed out that Princess Eglantine would be remaining in Jader, where she was to marry the new arl. Florestan saw no point in contesting that, as the arrangement had been made by the late Duke Prosper. About Eponine, Loghain said nothing. Florestan guessed that she would be used as a pawn of some sort. Orlais was not strong enough to force this issue, and Loghain's temper was understandably uncertain.

Within the hour, the King of Ferelden stalked back out through the Gate of the Sun, his face like stone. Behind him marched his nobles and his captains, the army, the elves, the mages, and the Fereldan Grey Wardens. The sun rose higher as they left the walls of Val Royeaux behind them. Loghain did not look back at them. Others did.

"It's going to be a good day," Aeron remarked to Emrys. "Bright, but not too hot. Good traveling weather."

In time, there were some of the usual remarks, the insults, the quips. The Blight was over, and life went on, as it always does. Teams of soldiers hauled the ballistae along, their carriages loaded with treasure.

Not all of the treasure was loot. Strapped to one of the carriages was a sword covered in cloth of gold, a suit of red dragonbone armor, and a metal chest containing the last of Bronwyn Cousland. Behind it trailed a big mabari with a weary gait, head down and tail between his legs, the image of inconsolable grief.

EPILOGUE



RECESSIONAL

OUR GRACES! MY LORDS, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN! On this first day of Eluviesta, the thirty-sixth year of the Dragon Age, the three hundred and ninety-fourth from the founding of the kingdom, by command of Their Majesties, King Fergus and Queen Anora, I declare this Landsmeet in session!"

A rustle of expectation, as the king rose to make his speech from the throne. This was King Fergus' second Landsmeet as king, and he appeared to have settled into the role as if born to it. In his scabbard was the fabled sword Nemetos, and both he and his queen wore splendid dwarven-made crowns, the gift of King Bhelen of Orzammar. Relations between Ferelden and the dwarven kingdom were warm, though Bhelen retained a human diplomat to carry messages back and forth. The Blight had given most dwarves all the surface experience they could possibly desire. Nor were many dwarves emigrating to the surface, now that Bhelen's reforms had given opportunity to the casteless.

Carver Hawke, Warden-Commander of Ferelden, took



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his place among the notables, attended by his second, Catriona Puckley, and his senior mage, Jowan. Magister and Lily sat, tails wagging a little, on their best behavior.

Because of the Wardens' noble service during the Blight, and in memory of Queen Bronwyn, the Crown had granted the Warden-Commander a vote in the Landsmeet. This was contingent on the Warden-Commander being Fereldan-born and bred, and also on the appointment being approved by the Crown. The appointment was supported by the grant of land around Soldier's Peak: a considerable stretch of the Coast Mountains. It was in no way as rich as the city of Amaranthine, ruled by Adam Hawke, but the Warden-Commander had other holdings, and a prestige that placed him above all other Fereldan banns in order of precedence.

Carver smoothed his grey silk tabard, elegantly embroidered in blue and silver, and tried not to look nervous. Landsmeets were no new thing to him, though this was his first as Warden-Commander. He always made a point of standing off by himself, not aligning himself with his brother. It bothered Mother, but Carver was his own man, and the Wardens had their own agenda. Fergus was well launched into his speech: his voice resonant, his appearance handsome and vigorous, his manner authoritative yet genial.

" – and the friendly maritime rivalry among the cities of the Waking Sea – "

Carver smirked. "Friendly rivalry" was for the benefit of the foreign dignitaries. Plenty of rivalry, with precious little to do



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with friendship. Adam was ruthless in promoting Amaranthine shipping, but had the sense to be moderate when it came to his fellow Fereldans. He was conducting what amounted to a private war with Ostwick, and relations with Viscount Marlein Selbrech of Kirkwall were decidedly frosty. Not that Adam was particularly worried, until the Kirkwallers could keep the same dynasty in control for two generations running. After the Marcher Wardens had paid their visit to Kirkwall, everything had changed. No Templar was likely to be showing his face there until the end of the age.

" – the secure succession, and the imminent birth of another prince or princess for the kingdom!"

Jowan nudged him, looking at Queen Anora. Poor woman... she really should have kept to her apartments. She was expecting the third royal child within five years – and expecting it any day, for that matter. No one would scorn her as barren now, but she looked as if she had paid a price for it. Ferelden's succession was indeed secure, with the births of Prince Caradoc and his younger brother Bryce. Carver's mother told her family that this time the Queen was hoping for a daughter, whom she would name after her own mother, Celia. Others might whisper hopes for the children to be given the great names of the nation's heroes, but Anora thought either Bronwyn or Loghain too heavy a burden of expectation to place upon a child, and Fergus, after consideration, reluctantly agreed with her.

Carver's stepbrothers, Arl Corbus and Bann Lothar, glanced



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his way and gave him affable smiles. They were growing up into fine young men and competent nobles, if a bit wild.

“ — new opportunities for those seeking honest employment — ”

Corbus' lands were the closest to the elven homeland, and he had done fairly well keeping the peace. Many resented the sight of elves traveling on the West Road, passing through South Reach and disappearing into the Brecilian Forest. There was some disgruntlement at the diminishing supply of cheap elven labor — and pretty elven whores. Carver glanced over at a group of whispering banns with some distaste. What did they expect? The Highever and Amaranthine Alienages had been completely emptied. Many in the Denerim Alienage had also fallen victim to the slavers. Now the place appeared to be nearly abandoned. The population of the Gwaren Alienage, too, had been halved, and there was a steady trickle from that city, going north... but not to Denerim. Carver had heard of ships from lands north of the Waking Sea, carrying elves to Ferelden. These put in at none of the large ports, but dropped the elves off along the Amaranthine coast, nearest to the elven homeland.

For elves were leaving human lands, never to be seen again. Foremost among them had been Tara, Warden-Commander of Ferelden. Loghain had given her his support, but in the end it was simply not enough to cope with the adamantine wall of prejudice and disdain. With Loghain gone, Tara had resigned her office to Carver. An elf mage was someone that many outside the Wardens could not accept. The First Warden had warned her, and however stupid and



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cowardly he had been about everything else, in this he had been entirely correct. How many times had she come back to Soldier's Peak from Denerim fuming with repressed rage? The nobles of Denerim — at least those who had not gone to war — knew only one way to relate to her: they spoke to her and treated her as a favorite lady's maid. Even the Queen had... well, recriminations were useless.

Zevran had done his best to defuse her anger, but Zevran was gone with her. He had not wanted to become a Warden, but on the march back to the Orne he had become infected, and accepted his fate with good grace. Carver smiled, remembering Zevran's words at his Joining:

“Some bodily fluids even I would prefer not to touch, but it seems I have little choice. I shall follow in distinguished — and charming — footsteps.”

Tara and Zevran had paid a farewell visit to Orzammar, taking Shale and the other golems with them, to see Astrid and Broasca's little nephew and niece. Then they had departed. All the Dalish Wardens had likewise retreated into the elven homeland: Darach, Nuala, and Steren had preceded Tara, ostensibly on a mission. The newer Dalish recruits had gone a little later. A few city elves remained at Soldier's Peak.

Then, of course, there was the continuing issue of Adaia and Siofranni, who were still technically on the Warden payroll, but who had hared off to sea, and who answered to no authority but themselves. Tara had noted them down as going to “consult with our Tevinter brothers and sisters,”

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but Carver did not think that was the terminology he would have chosen to describe raiding Tevinter slave ships. Fergus, of course, had no problem granting letters of marque for the purpose. He had a soft spot for Captain Adaia Tabris. The ships discharged their elven passengers further south on the coast, and Adaia sold the empty ships in Denerim.

" – maintaining our national principles of freedom and protection under the laws for all – "

Admiral Isabela had stepped into the power vacuum left by the decimation of the Felicisima Armada. The Tevinters had at first taken advantage of the lack of pirates in the northern Amaranthine to expand their trade. Isabela and her fleet had happened on one of their ships by accident. After that, they sought them out deliberately. Not only could they feel virtuous about freeing slaves, but Tevinter slave ships always carried huge amounts of gold.

Perhaps Adaia had not meant to be a pirate... er... privateer. Originally, she and Siofranni had gone north to find and rescue Fereldan elves. Fenris, who knew Tevinter, had tried to make the girls understand the scope of that undertaking, but they lacked the frame of reference to grasp it. The slave market of Minrathous alone was nearly the size of the entire city of Denerim. They also – at first – had not understood the use to which the Tevinters would put the older captives. Those were not desirable as slaves, but were perfectly satisfactory fuel for Blood Magic, and apparently there was an insatiable market for such. The elderly... even

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the middle-aged... would have been bought and used up within a very short time frame. Adaia's efforts had not located more than a few dozen Fereldan elves.

If she could not rescue, then she would have revenge. Besides, waiting for the Tevinters at the nexus of the Amaranthine Ocean and the Waking Sea was far wiser than risking one's life further north. Fenris was still with them: he thought their quest worthy and noble, even if ultimately doomed.

" – and by prudence to avoid embroiling ourselves in foreign disputes – "

Ferelden was probably the most peaceful nation in Thedas at the moment, if only because news came to them slowly.

While the Rivainni Wardens were off fighting the Blight, their stronghold had been raided by the Qunari. Since it was held only by a small force, it had been sacked and the Warden garrison slaughtered. Before its fall, the Warden in command had destroyed all records and secret documents, and filled the place with traps. Quite a few Qunari died in their turn. When the Rivainnis returned, there was real fury. Had anyone known about this earlier, Sten would never have been permitted to return to Par Vollen with what was left of the Tome of Koslun. There had been retaliation by a temporary alliance of Rivainni, Antivan, and Tevinter Wardens. The Qunari no longer held Kont-Arr, their one foothold on mainland Thedas. Those professing the Qun – of whatever race – had been exiled from Rivain. The conflict only simmered now, but no true peace had been made. Perhaps Sten might do some good,



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talking to the Qunari leadership. Carver would prefer not to have to take his Wardens north. A full-blown Warden-Qunari war was not a pleasant prospect, and did nothing to further the Wardens' mission against the darkspawn.

" — Our splendid improvements to roads, bridges, and harbors, made possible by King Loghain's skillful diplomacy — "

Carver smirked. Fergus was careful of Anora's feelings. Some nobles had described it as "Loghain's low, greedy peasant cunning." The improvements were perfectly real, and had been paid for by what amounted to the sale of the Imperial Princess Eponine.

Empress Celandine had been wed to Prince Florestan, and they were now ruling a much-reduced Orlais from its temporary capital of Val Foret. Though they had lost Jader and the north, the Empire was still incredibly rich, and a new city was being built at the mouth of the Orne, the land cleared and cleansed by the Orlesian Grey Wardens. Val Orne had been carefully planned, and quite a lot of the great monuments of Val Royeaux were being salvaged to adorn it. Even after the rigorous looting by the rest of the Wardens, there were things they simply could not carry off, or even find.

Eglantine, as previously arranged, was married to Alistair in a solemn ceremony at Jader Chantry. From all anyone could gather, it was quite a happy marriage. Alistair had always wanted someone to love. That left the Imperial Princess Eponine. What had happened to her, in Carver's opinion, was not one of Fereldan's finest hours,



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but he understood why Loghain had done what he had.

An heir to the Orlesian throne had a value to any ambitious court. The Orlesian succession was fragile. Empress Celandine had born a child last year, but before that, Eponine had been the heiress-presumptive. Loghain had brought the girl back with him to Denerim, and had essentially auctioned her off to the highest bidder. Or, more correctly, to the highest bidder who was not Nevarran.

For Loghain had considered the growing power of the Nevarrans, and had no desire to give them more. A weakened but stable Orlais was a far safer neighbor. In the end Antiva had purchased an Orlesian Imperial Princess for an immense sum, which Loghain ploughed back into Fereldan lands and into Denerim itself. Eponine was thus the single most valuable article of loot taken in the war. Carver, of course, had absolutely no idea what the girl herself had thought about it.

" — for the honor and prosperity of the kingdom!"

Fergus was done talking, and there were cheers. Carver smiled and applauded dutifully. He had been listening with half an ear, and had caught the other major points. The Queen's university was expanding, filled with displaced Orlesian scholars; Tevinter ships were still not permitted to drop anchor in Fereldan ports; the Orlesians and Nevarrans had more or less settled on a border; Ferelden was not going to tolerate the war between the mages and Templars spreading into its territory. So far, that was

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raging hottest in the inland Marches: Starkhaven, Tantarvale, and Hasmal: cities that had been least involved in the Blight. Lately, however, there was trouble at the Circle in Cumberland, and word of battles in the distant cities of Andoral's Reach and Perendale. The mages who had risked their lives for Thedas were not inclined to submit to imprisonment any longer. A great many mages had fled to Tevinter; others had come to Fereldan, where they were openly countenanced, though carefully regulated.

Here in Ferelden, mages were legally running clinics and serving in the army or city guards. Records were kept, and approved mages had their badges. They seemed to be blending into city life fairly seamlessly. Out in the countryside, however, one heard the occasional story of mages being mobbed, or a suspected mage child being stoned to death by frightened peasants, but the Templars still operated to protect them, even though somewhat differently than before.

Some of the Templars were acting independently of the Chantry now, their new headquarters established fairly quickly in Cumberland. The Chantry itself was still dragging out negotiations, unable to settle even on where to hold its conclave to elect a new Divine. Grand Cleric Muirin, aged greatly of late, was in effect free from all outside influences. Fereldan's Templars still recognized her authority. Aged Templars were cared for in the hospice established in the old cathedral dormitory.

Nobles were now being recognized. Nathaniel Howe

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and Rothgar Wulffe announced the birth of sons; Alistair and Eglantine had a new daughter.

It all went on and on. Demands to "do something" about the elves rose up from the Bannorn.

"Do what?" Bann Varel asked, rather testily. "You complain we have too few elves. How can the Crown – or anyone else – do *anything* about that? Well, maybe we could stop *killing* them, I suppose..."

His sarcasm was not appreciated. Fergus stepped in to cool the parties off. Later, after settling a bitter dowry dispute, the first day of the Landsmeet ended, and everyone was invited to the ball that night, which would begin at sundown. The King gently took the Queen's hand, and they walked from the Chamber, as the nobles bowed and curtseyed.

The crowd relaxed, and a band of minstrels, up in a corner, began playing. It was one of the Queen's innovations. Zoe Pheronis, the Royal minstrel, led the group. Carver recognized her apprentice Amethyne among the human players. She was becoming quite a pretty girl, and wore her hair in such a way that one did not notice at first that she was an elf. Carver vaguely remembered that Tara had once approached the girl about something, and Amethyne had been uninterested and unfriendly, telling Tara that she was a "minstrel, not an elf!" Perhaps that was why she was still in Denerim. The Queen's minstrels had lodgings in the Palace. Amethyne probably had not set foot in the Alienage in years.

"Commander?" Catriona asked. "Are we going back to

the Compound?"

He should, probably, for there were stacks of paperwork. However, this was the first day of the Landsmeet.

"What do you say we go out for a drink first?"

"Not me," Catriona protested. "I can't just throw on a velvet doublet and be devastating. If I really have to go to this swish-and-tits affair, I need some serious help. I'll see you two awful pillocks later." She stalked away, musing dolefully on corsets and hairpins. Carver grinned after her.

"Jowan?"

"Drinks? Absolutely. Nobody's going to find me devastating, anyway."

They were not the only ones who wanted to kill the next few hours in a tankard of ale. It was a long walk to the Market District and the Gnawed Noble, but Carver had not been to Denerim in months, and felt like reacquainting himself with the city.

Oh, Maker, here was Mother.

"Carver, darling! Are you coming to the estate? Emma is wild to see you. Hello, Warden Jowan."

Jowan bowed. "Arlessa Leandra."

She kissed Carver, of course, and he let her. She was still living at Bryland House. Corbus wouldn't hear of his stepmother and half-sister leaving; but Mother told him that she would stay until he was properly married, and then step aside for his wife. That would not be particularly soon. Corbus was only eighteen, newly released from

his guardianship, and enjoying life as the most eligible young man in Ferelden at the moment.

Mother looked harried, but that was only to be expected when a woman her age was dealing with two teenaged boys and a four year old daughter. She was also the guardian of Arlessa Faline and Lady Jancey Kendells, though the steward managed their property under the supervision of the King himself. She had nearly died in childbirth — *would* have died without Bethany's care. Instead, she had a treasured memento of her all-too-brief time with Leonas Bryland. Lady Emma Bryland would likely have her share of adventures, and she was growing up as essentially an only child, since even Lothar was eleven years older than she. So far — and all the family was quietly holding its collective breath — the girl had shown no signs of magic. She did, however, like to make her dolls fight with swords.

"Not just now, Mother. I need to go to the Market and pick up some presents first. I'll come by before sundown and see Emma then, before I go back to dress for the ball."

"Oh, very well. But you're dining with us tomorrow. No excuses!"

"Er... will Habren be there?" He glanced around the Landsmeet Chamber, hoping against hope.

"Of course," sighed Leandra. "Where else could she stay? Don't begrudge her a few days at the Landsmeet, Carver. She hasn't many opportunities to mix in society."

"And I wonder why that is."



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"Carver."

He gave her a kiss, and escaped. Jowan was smiling quietly. Carver elbowed him, and then saw a friend. Magister did too, and went over to sniff courteously at Scrapper.

"Alistair! Want to go out for drinks?"

"Always."

"Are you growing a *beard*?"

"Hey!" Alistair protested. "Don't you wound my manly vanity! Eglantine thinks it makes me look powerful."

"Your arlessa isn't here?" Carver had not seen her on the floor of the Landsmeet.

Alistair made a face. "It's a long, long trip, and with the new baby... no. I miss her, but she needed the rest."

Also, Carver thought cynically, he had heard that Arlessa Eglantine did not think much of Denerim, and did not like bending the knee to Anora, who was not Eglantine's equal by birth. She had not been to Denerim since the coronation.

The men and their dogs walked on, out into the fair spring day. Adam and Arl Nathaniel were just behind them, and Carver, Alistair, and Jowan paused to let the men catch up. Hunter gave a pleased yip at the sight of other dogs he knew. While they exchanged the usual pleasantries, Carver thought about this Landsmeet, and about Queen Anora, who had said absolutely nothing in course of the day's proceedings.

The Queen was popular with the commoners, but had never really made many friends among the noblewomen.



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She seemed to like his mother, and Leandra spent quite a bit of time with the Queen, but the younger generation had never quite warmed up to her... even Arlessa Callista, who was pleasant to everyone. Some, like Arlessa Kaitlyn, Anora intimidated; some, like Charade, thought Anora was a heartless opportunist who was all too satisfied that Queen Bronwyn had never come home; some like Arlessa Eglantine, found her insufferably arrogant. Carver had always got on perfectly well with the Queen himself. Most men did. Maybe she was so accustomed to dealing with her father and her two husbands that she had no understanding of other women. It had seemed to Carver that Bronwyn had got on with her well enough, but looking back, it was hard to tell. He had been young and naive then, and Bronwyn and Anora were both diplomats by nature, who had loved the same man in their own different ways.

Now, of course, Queen Anora was a mother. She had trounced those rumors about a curse of barrenness with admirable dispatch, but was so involved with her pregnancies and her lyings-in and her child-rearing, that she had little time for politics. When one spoke of the Crown, one spoke of King Fergus, not King Fergus and Queen Anora. Anora was popular with the commoners, but Fergus was popular with *everyone*.

The three noblemen talked about their children; pretending to scorn soft-headed sentimentality, but clearly proud of their families. Carver had not seen Berenice in



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the Landsmeet Chamber, and wondered if Adam had left her in Amaranthine. When there was a moment to get a word in, he asked about her.

"Berenice? Of course she's here. She and Callista are busily adorning themselves. Berenice had a bad bout of morning sickness today, but she should be fine for the ball, which is what she cares about. Be a good fellow and dance with her, won't you?"

"Of course."

Carver hoped that none of Adam's children would have magic, either. Sometimes he worried. Adam had led such a charmed life. He had been so *lucky*: knighted by a king on the last day of the king's life; in the perfect spot to catch a teyrn's eye; a rich bannorn vacant at just the right time; fancied by a pretty foreigner with a dowry; placed so no one would make him go west to the Blight Lands. Some day, Carver believed that all this phenomenal good luck must be paid for, one way or another. He just hoped the bill was not presented to Adam's children.

"Have you seen Bethany yet?" Adam asked.

"No. I just got into town last night. How is she? Is she coming to the ball tonight?"

"Probably not. She doesn't care much for such events anymore, you know. I haven't been here long either, and she gets home late and leaves early, so we've hardly had a chance to talk. Mother says she'll be at dinner tomorrow."

"I'll get her a present, too. I wonder what she'd like?"



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"Something that smells nice, I daresay, after dealing with the festering sores of unwashed paupers. No, I didn't get her that myself. There was a shipment of Hercinian linen that was impounded for harbor fees. Bethany's clinic always needs linen."

Nathaniel spoke up. "Your sister is a wonderful woman. A pity she won't be joining us."

Adam shrugged. "She's quite lost interest in anything so frivolous as dancing. She might as well be a Chantry sister. Probably would be, if she weren't a mage."

Carver did not agree, but also did not want to argue about Bethany in front of others. If she had not been born a mage, there was no telling what Bethany would have done. Now and then he tried to talk her into Joining the Wardens, but she was very... happy... with her life, and with her friends and colleagues. She had bought the houses on either side of her own, and expanded the clinic. King Loghain had paid to have the buildings faced with stone, the upper story enlarged, and the roof tiled with slate to reduce the risk of fire. It was an impressive establishment now.

"We'll only be steps away. I'll look in on her."

"Sounds good," Jowan agreed casually. He'd always had a certain... fondness... for Bethany.

Denerim looked prosperous. Ferelden was, of course, one of the great winners of the Blight. One could make the claim that Nevarra had gained far more, since it had absorbed all of Orlais north of the Blight Lands, but Ferel-



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dan had not done badly, either. Shipping duties and taxes from Jader were enough in themselves to make the Crown rich. Denerim had grown considerably, and the city was spilling past its walls.

A carriage rumbled past them. Those inside — Bann Alfstanna and her husband Lord Rhys, old Bann Fredegunda, Lady Keyne Mac Coo, Bann Stronar and Lady Ailidh, called out greetings. They were off to the Market, apparently, to make some last-minute purchases before tonight's festivities. A little later, Corbus, Lothar, and their friend Ser Bevin rode past, joking and rough-housing.

"Are you going to the Gnawed Noble?" Lothar yelled. "Too bad! We'll be there before you! I daresay we won't leave you a drop of ale!"

The boys galloped off, laughing.

"Insufferable young asses," muttered Nathaniel.

Alistair only chuckled. "It's not like we're old men ourselves!" His expression changed. "Though *that* makes me feel like one..."

The street opened out into the market here, and the view, framed by the buildings on either side, was of the statue that was now a major landmark. Queen Bronwyn and Scout were immortalized in bronze, watching over the comings and goings before them. Scout's nose shone bright as gold: it was considered lucky to rub it. As usual, flowers of varying freshness had been left on the plinth. There had been considerable debate about the



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statue, since many thought Queen Bronwyn should stand outside the Landsmeet. However, Calenhad was already there, and Loghain had preferred the Market, remarking that Bronwyn would find it less dull. He was the one who had insisted that Scout be included on the monument: the Nevarran craftsman had been puzzled at first, but then thought it lively and inventive.

"Poor old Scout," Alistair muttered.

A moment of silence. Bronwyn's mabari had never recovered from the loss of his human. He had lived on another year and a half, slouching after Loghain, and had even sired two litters on Amber before he simply did not wake up one morning. Loghain had him buried in the palace gardens, in front of Bronwyn's urn. with an engraved stone to mark the spot. Carver reckoned that once Scout was gone, Loghain had nothing left to stay for. Not even his grandsons could hold him.

"Well, now I definitely need a drink," Carver said. "That statue is bloody depressing."

"I thought you needed to buy presents," Adam pointed out. "Drink first. Definitely."

Edwina's couches were as soft as ever, and they sank into them blissfully, off in the far, dark, private corner near the bar. The barmaids brought them ale and snacks, along with some crunchy treats for the dogs. Corbus, Bevin, and Lothar were by the door, laughing uproariously. They had joined another party of nobles.



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"Things aren't so bad," Nathaniel said, apropos of nothing. "Things aren't so bad, here in Ferelden. The Templars haven't tried to annul all the mages, the mages aren't rioting in the streets, and nobody's trying to assassinate the royal family, like they did in Starkhaven and tried to in Antiva. We don't have to deal with a slave rebellion like the one in Vyrrantium —"

"Ew." Adam grimaced, remembering the gruesome stories that had come out of Tevinter. Savage atrocities on both sides, and a merciless repression at the end. The only good thing to come of it was that some Tevinters had become convinced that owning slaves was more trouble than it was worth.

"— and no darkspawn," Nathaniel concluded. He glanced over at Carver. "I hope."

"Not on the surface, anyway," Carver agreed.

Alistair snorted. "No, not on the surface." For Nathaniel and Adam's benefit, he added, "Ferelden's in pretty good shape, even below. All that underground travel during the Blight really worked wonders. There are still pockets and odd tunnels, here and there. It's a lot worse elsewhere. I heard from Leliana awhile back. The Orlesians were going to do some serious hunting for Broodmother nests out in the Western Approach. Riordan's pretty determined. No word since, but I expect them to be down there for a long time."

Maybe forever, he thought, but did not say aloud.

Carver grunted at the news. "If Leliana's in the Deep Roads, at least she won't be writing books that make me



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look like an idiot."

Some chuckles, the loudest, most irritating from Adam, of course. Leliana had written two immensely popular books about the Blight: neither of them the detailed military history some had hoped for. One was a book intended for children that had claimed a wider readership: *BRONWYN, GIRL WARDEN OF FERELDEN*. Charmingly illustrated with woodcuts, it presented Bronwyn as a protector of the people, a friend of children and the oppressed, a pious and heroic warrior in the service of Andraste and the Maker. The final illustration, of Bronwyn and Scout looking out at a glorious sunrise together, was modeled after the touching statue in the Denerim Market. It was just the book for those who liked to think of Queen Bronwyn as a pure-hearted avatar of Andraste, returned to save her people from the darkspawn. Carver thought the book portrayed a milk-and-water Bronwyn; a ladies' tea party sort of Bronwyn; a Chantry-sister Bronwyn. He hated seeing it in the hands of impressionable girls like Faline and Jancey Kendells.

Leliana's other book, *TALES OF THE BLIGHT COMPANIONS*, irritated him even more. It was certainly an interesting, readable book, containing all the stories Bronwyn and her friends had told each other. Leliana had not been present for all of them, but she had ferreted them out from the survivors. It also contained some material putting the stories in context, and Carver was mortified to discover that Leliana had included the oblivious stupidity with which



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he had told Bronwyn the all-too-appropriate story of "The Boy Who Found Fear at Last." Yes, he had been young, but the readers did not know that. It was mortifying, and everyone in Ferelden appeared to have a copy.

Another round came, and this loosened their tongues a little more. Alistair spoke first.

"I wonder where Loghain is right now."

Carver shook his head. "I wonder if he's even alive."

Jowan said nothing. Loghain was gone, taking Jowan's deepest, darkest secret with him. No one now would ever know that Jowan had poisoned Arl Eamon on Loghain's orders.

"He's alive," Nathaniel said, his grey eyes fierce in the dim light. "He had his sword and his mabari with him. I'd back him against anyone."

"Well, he certainly traveled light," Adam said, a little more casually. He had never felt much personal loyalty to Loghain. Adam was the Couslands' man, and was well pleased that his friend Fergus sat on the throne. "But where did he go? That's the real question. It's one thing to abdicate. It's another to *vanish* like that. There was a rumor that he'd had a message of some sort. Someone from the north who passed on some intelligence. What would make a king walk away from his throne?"

No one wanted to say out loud the most popular theory — the one whispered in cheap taverns and throughout the freeholds of the Bannorn.

King Maric is alive. Loghain Mac Tir has gone to rescue him.



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Alistair blew out a breath. He could think of few things that would make a bigger mess in Ferelden than the return of King Maric. Granted, he sometimes wondered what it would be like to meet his father... to show him his city of Jader and his beautiful princess and their darling little girls... but it really and truly would be a mess.

There was another theory: the one that was supported tacitly by the Crown. King Loghain had abdicated and gone on a pilgrimage to the Urn of the Sacred Ashes, there to take vows as a holy brother. Alistair had trouble seeing it, but Cauthrien wasn't confirming or denying it, and she was Bann of Haven. People visited the great temple there, but none of it quite matched Bronwyn's descriptions. The Chantry refused to allow pilgrims access to the Ashes in their big elaborate urn in the temple, and there had been some unrest because of it. No one had seen Loghain there, but they wouldn't, of course, if he had gone there to seek peace and contemplation. Alistair considered quizzing Cauthrien again, or maybe her husband, Lord Darrow, who knew Alistair from their time in Ostagar together.

"Well, who knows?" Adam replied to himself, lightening the mood. "A little mystery makes the world a more interesting place. Another round, I think."

"And more cheese," Alistair added. "Especially the smoked Amaranthine. It's my favorite. It always makes me think of Bronwyn."

"Cheese makes you think of Queen Bronwyn?" Adam



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laughed, a little incredulously.

Alistair was unfazed. "Smoked Amaranthine," he said loftily. "And Rainesfere Blue. The night of the victory at Ostagar... when Duncan fell..." his smile faltered. "We were both in awful shape after the Tower of Ishal, and she dragged me off to the Highever tent. Poor old Wynne came to heal us. The servants brought us food and wine, and those were the cheeses. It was the best meal I'd ever had... apples and little crisp oatcakes and glorious cheese. Bronwyn mentioned it to me... that last day. We had time to wolf down some food and I brought her a plate of what we could find. Among the odds and ends was a wedge of Haute-Cantal."

Adam smiled, not unkindly. "Again he remembers the cheese."

"Well, it was my last conversation with her, and her last meal, so the details are pretty much permanently stuck in my mind."

"I remember the cheese," Carver said, considering. "And the pickled herring."

"I remember the disgusting porridge we had the next morning," Jowan said. "We were all so miserable, it seemed perfect." He made a face at the bottom of his mug. "At least we ate. I don't think Loghain did, until Tara nagged him, just before the funeral."

"Tomorrow's the fifth anniversary," Jowan said softly. "We all loved her so much. Maybe that's why Loghain couldn't stand any more Landsmeets and their feasts and balls. The last time he saw her alive, she was flying away from him."



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Adam said, "Fergus has to put up with it."

"The King wasn't there, and I'm glad," Jowan replied. "It was bad enough for him without seeing what happened."

"Better to have seen her a last time," Nathaniel disagreed quietly. "I wish I *had* been there."

"I understand how you feel," said Adam, "but too many were infected with the Blight sickness as it was, and it was a sad and weary march home for them."

"Too right," grunted Alistair. "We *did* love her, like Jowan says. Well..." he reddened, and waved his hands in excuse. "... at once point I was actually *in* love with her. Stupid, stupid... but I was. I gave her a rose. She was really nice about it, but of course I never had a chance."

"I had a chance," Nathaniel said slowly. "I was *this* close —" he gestured with his fingers — "to a betrothal, when my father lost his temper with me and sent me to the Free Marches."

"Don't look at me," Jowan said, blushing. "I loved her, but not that way. I would as soon thought of Andraste *that* way. Besides, I was in love with someone else when I met her."

"Tara?"

"No." Jowan shook his head. "I don't like to talk about it, but not Tara. Tara was always a sister to me. I miss her."

"I was nineteen," said Carver. "I was in love with a *lot* of women: Bronwyn, Leliana, Adaia... yes, I really am out of my mind... Danith, Maeve. Anyone but a mage. That would be like being in love with *my* sister."

"Not Aveline?" Jowan teased. Aveline and Carver clashed



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frequently. She was currently a Senior Warden and in command of the little Ostagar post, far, far away.

Carver scowled. "No."

"You should find someone," Adam advised. "Both of you. Marriage is wonderful."

The married men dutifully echoed the sentiment. They even seemed sincere.

"It's a pretty serious responsibility, though," Alistair said, hesitating over his words. "Teagan wants me to contract for a marriage between his son and my little Moira! She's only three! I told him they're too young, and they might not even like each other!"

Nathaniel and Adam shared a glance. This was interesting. Did Alistair not understand that Teagan might be trying to position his child as a rival candidate for the throne? Moira Fitzmaric's bloodlines made her a very desirable bride. On the other hand, maybe Alistair – or Eglantine – understood *exactly* what was going on, and he was deflecting the intrigue with a mask of naivete.

"I'm not in any rush." Carver shrugged. "The Blight Companions gave me high standards." He finished his ale, tired of the conversation. "I've got to get some presents before the shops close down. Later, then."

"I'll come with you," said Jowan. "I want to say hello to Bethany."

They passed a table where Banns Ceorlic, Babcock, Repton, and Goelim had their heads together, talking in angry low voices. Carver caught a few words.



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" – high time someone taught those knife-ears a lesson! We could go right into that 'homeland' of theirs and fetch out some of them. Who'd be the wiser?"

" – And end up feathered liked a duck? No, thank you. Besides – sssshh!"

Carver gave them a look, and Babcock stared back. The others did not meet his eyes.

Jowan said softly. "They're all talk."

They walked on, out into the clean spring sunshine.

With the Landsmeet, all the vendors were out in force, displaying their best goods. Pretty girls sashayed through the Market, waving long sticks draped with colorful ribbons for sale. Carts offered minced pies and dumplings. A pair of jugglers performed for the crowd, while a ragged child held out a battered tin plate for coin. Beggars pleaded for alms. One man sat under the eaves of a chandler's shop, displaying the stumps of his legs and the sign "Wounded in the War." Carver did not recognize him, but it was possible he was not lying. He dropped a silver into the man's upturned hat. There were potion sellers, and toy sellers, and book sellers, and sellers of singing birds and fine embroidery.

There were people here to buy the wares, too, and not all were Fereldan. One saw Nevarrans, Orlesians, Antivans, Marchers from every city, and the dark skin of Rivain. Foreign faces, but not many elves or dwarves, and no Qunari at all, unsurprisingly.

A shrewish voice caught Carver's ear, and he winced,



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slipping behind a vendor's sunshade.

"Nine sovereigns for *this*? It's not even embroidered! Is this *magic* silk? Did *Andraste* wear it? I'll give you five!"

"It's Habren!" he whispered to Jowan. "Wait 'til she goes past!"

Jowan smirked, but indulged him. The dogs pricked up their ears and stared at a person they remembered they disliked.

The merchant refused to come down sufficiently, and Habren flounced away, her face red and angry. She was not enjoying her reduced circumstances, and to be fair, they were not entirely her fault. Had her baby lived, the boy's claim to the Arling of Denerim would likely have prevailed. But he had not, and Habren's hopes of ruling the capital through her child had died with him. She spent most of the year at her little manor south of Denerim, and was bored and lonely. Mother said the place was full of cats, and that Habren's handsome steward was shockingly familiar with her. Charade had confided to Carver that he shouldn't be surprised if Habren appeared to gain weight, stayed secluded in the country for a few months, and then adopted an unknown infant as a "ward" some time fairly soon. Habren was a bitter, disappointed woman, which did not make her company at family dinners any more agreeable than before. Worse still, if she saw Carver here in the Market, she would brazenly demand coin from him, and revile him if he refused.

Once his stepsister was out of sight, Carver hurried to buy his gifts. A young woman with an Orlesian accent offered



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scented soaps and oils. She was quite pretty, and Carver was glad to bargain for her wares. He hoped Bethany liked Andraste's Grace. Somebody he knew did. Was it Bethany... or Leliana? Oh, well. It was nice, anyway. The dogs sneezed.

A woodcarver had all sorts of jointed wooden animals for sale. There was a charming little mabari there, just Magister's color. Surely an aspiring battlemaiden like Emma would want a mabari? He looked again, and then chose a black one instead. Scout was gone, but still popular.

Jowan surveyed the crowd. "More foreigners here than there used to be."

"I suppose the Landsmeet brings them. That and the Cathedral."

Not the old Cathedral, of course, though that was still in use. The clinic nearby was bustling, filled with drunken brawlers with broken heads, fussy children with sore throats, and injured laborers. Carver did not recognize the Templar on duty, though he knew Sister Ursula, sitting behind her table to greet their visitors.

"Warden-Commander!" She smiled. "And Warden Jowan. I hope you are well. I'll tell Bethany you're here. Why don't you take a seat in the office? She's a bit busy..." The good sister bustled off, and the two men edged past the benches, with their dogs at their heels. Those waiting for treatment gaped at them and whispered to their neighbors — at least those not moaning and clutching their heads.

The office was a nice little room with a cheerful fire.



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It had been a bedchamber originally, but Bethany had needed a place for storing books and records and for mixing potions and poultices. Voices came closer. Carver looked up, hearing Bethany outside the door.

"— Otto, I don't know what they'll say about that, but we can — Carver!"

She was as pretty as ever, though she was wearing her hair up and out of her way in a severe coiled plait.

"And Jowan. I'm so glad to see you. We've been incredibly busy."

Ser Otto was just behind her. He murmured something too low to hear, and Bethany leaned toward him, nodding. The Templar gave her a smile as he turned away. Carver scowled. He knew that kind of smile. Before he could start interrogating her, or making remarks about chaste "Chantry marriages," she saw the little parcel in his hands.

"Is that for me? That's lovely! Thank you so much! What's that?"

"It's for Emma," he mumbled, wrong-footed. "It's a dog."

Magister looked up at him quizzically. The object certainly was not a *real* dog.

"I'm sure she'll love it. She's so adorable. Look, I'm sorry, but we're horribly busy today. Finn's visiting his parents, and Keili is nervous about delivering babies. I'll see you at dinner tomorrow. So nice to see you, Jowan." Another kiss, a pat on Magister's head, and Carver found himself hustled away.

He stalked through the door, blowing out an angry breath.



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"Carver, wait!" cried Jowan, trying to get past a shouting merchant family, whose grandmother was complaining shrilly of her 'rheumatics.' Exasperated, Jowan shot a healing spell at the surprised woman, and hurried after Carver.

Carver stopped, and glared back at the clinic. "That Ser Otto is too friendly with her."

"You mean you think she's too friendly with *him*."

"Same thing."

"You know it's not. You can't tell Bethany how to live her life. Not even your mother can do that. Come on. Why don't we head back to the Compound?"

Carver sulked, too annoyed to notice Jowan's own disappointment, as they went the short way, through the Alienage. The gates were always open now. The main thoroughfare was paved with cobblestones and far better kept than it had been in former days. The reasons for that were not much to anyone's credit.

The depopulated Alienage was being eyed with fierce greed by speculators. Of course, young Arlessa Faline had the largest holdings there, and the King, her guardian, managed her property with scrupulous, conservative care. Faline was due to reach her majority this year, and no one was quite sure what she would decide about the Alienage. Most of the remaining elves lived in the tall, sturdy building commissioned by Queen Bronwyn, and that was a Crown property. Fergus had declared that as long as there were elves in Denerim, that building would shelter them.

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The other real estate in the Alienage could conceivably command immense rents, due to the demand for housing. No one had quite yet found the nerve to demand the dissolution of the Alienage. Carver suspected that was coming.

The location, there in the heart of the city, was prime: with access to the Market, King's Way, and Cathedral Street. Faline could make a fortune if she tore down the derelict buildings and replaced them with fine townhouses. The rents she could command would pay back her investment—and more — within only a few years. So urged the Queen, who saw little reason to be sentimental. The very same sort of redevelopment had been done in Highever, and the former Alienage — now Cousland Square — brought in enormous sums for the teyrnir. Anora might not have the energy for much, but this interested her. She was preparing for the day, by gradually making the Alienage less of an eyesore, paving the street, putting in the sewer feeder line that Bronwyn had wanted, and completing Bronwyn's plans for the building that replaced the rattletrap orphanage. It was quite a nice building, too, with an inner courtyard of its own, hence the name, "Queen Bronwyn's Court." If the day came that there were no more elves in Denerim, it would still do nicely: providing handsome, comfortable flats for those of more moderate means. The inner courtyard could then be planted with flowers, instead of cabbages.

A few faces peered out of doorways and windows, but very few indeed. Carver and Jowan walked on, and the

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dogs trotted beside them, pausing to pay their respects to the vhenadahl tree. It was considered important to keep that splendid tree alive, not so much out of respect for the elves, but because Queen Anora had decided that Denerim needed more greenery. Outside the walls, a triangle of Crown land had been set aside as the beginnings of a public garden. Nevarrans and Antivans and Orlesians had them, so Queen Anora had wanted one, too.

At the south end of the Alienage, the cobblestoned path crossed King's Way, and flowed into Cathedral Street. In fact, Loghain had straightened the old lane so you could look straight down it to the front of the new cathedral, Our Lady of the Sacred Ashes. It was not as big as the destroyed Grand Cathedral, but it was very beautiful in its own way, with a tall bell tower, windows of colored glass, and a staircase leading up to the arched double doors. There were quite a few people on the staircase. Where they there for Andraste? Or Bronwyn?

Perhaps they were there for the Ashes. People were beginning to make their way to Haven, but right here in Denerim was an authenticated pinch of Andraste's Ashes, sealed in a gold reliquary, watched over by the young priest who had been saved by Bronwyn years before. Sister Demelza was the assistant curator of relics, under the supervision of Mother Justine. The young woman had written a book about her miraculous cure by Queen Bronwyn, and was much sought out by pilgrims. Both book



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sales and offerings had brought a great deal of wealth to the Fereldan Chantry.

If he had time, Carver promised himself a visit. The cathedral was always worth a look. The statue of Andraste was as big as the one in Kirkwall, and gilded, and bore a strong resemblance to a young woman Carver had once known quite well, especially in the upturned eyes that all the world remembered. It was really a better likeness than the statue in the Market, though not as colorful as the portraits in the Palace or the Compound. Sometimes it was nice to see her again...

Later. He really must change, and he really must give Emma her present. Children loved presents. That reminded him...

"Don't let me forget to get something for Pepin while we're here. And Gwydion."

Jowan liked getting things for the children at Soldier's Peak, too.

"Pepin would like a new quiver. Something with a lot of color. Maybe one of the beaded Avvar ones. Gwydion's so little that anything would please him, though maybe we should go to the Wonders of Thedas..."

"Just don't get him a staff just yet, all right?"

Jowan chuckled. "You're right. He's too young for that. Maybe a golem doll."

He was fond of Gwydion, though Anders was very protective of his son, and would not allow him to be alone with Jowan. His thoughts found voice.



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"He's such a fine little lad. I've never understood how Morrigan could just go off and leave him."

"Morrigan!" Carver spat the name. "Who knows what happened to her? Maybe a bigger hawk ate her. One can but hope."

Morrigan's shape-shifting had caused no end of upheaval in Thedas. Once mages discovered that the ability was no myth, the Fereldans were harassed by other Wardens, demanding to learn the art. They were warned that it was perilous magic. One of their mages at the battle had never returned. Morrigan had told them that she had no doubt become beguiled by her animal form and had forgotten she was an elf. Human mages were unimpressed. What was too powerful for an elf should be a small matter for a human mage. Tara had taught her own people as best she could, for Morrigan was more difficult and refractory than ever since the end of the Blight, and loath to share secrets. Jowan and Anders taught the Wardens who came to them. Jowan suspected that Anders taught other mages as well: the apostates that occasionally made their way to Soldier's Peak, and then left, uninterested in joining the Wardens or registering for legal service to the kingdom. Sometimes those aspiring shape-shifters did indeed have odd, fatal accidents. Sometimes, they changed, and were unable to change back.

There had been a time when Morrigan seemed to be trying to make a go of it with Anders. She had been deeply depressed after the last battle, and Carver and others had attributed it to Bronwyn's death. Morrigan had seemed

fonder of her than of other people, and clearly her loss had hit the witch very hard. She and Anders had settled down in the quiet and comfort of Soldier's Peak, learning much from Avernus, and working on the new grand scheme for the Wardens with some diligence. At the end of the first year, Morrigan was with child, and in due course gave birth to a beautiful little boy she named Gwydion, after a legendary shape-shifting hero of long ago.

Once the child was weaned, Morrigan grew restless, and began leaving for days at a time, running through the mountain forests as a wolf, flying through the skies as a hawk. Her absences grew longer and longer, until one day it was clear that she was gone for good. Anders had searched for her, fearing that she was lying wounded and helpless somewhere, but in the end he had come home to take care of his son. The boy already showed signs of being a powerful mage. Avernus had devised elaborate plans for the boy's education. It was such a pleasure for Jowan to know that the child would never be locked away in a Circle and threatened with death or Tranquility.

"By the time we get back to the Keep," Jowan said, changing the subject, "Malea should have laid her latest clutch of eggs."

Carver glanced about him reflexively. No one could possibly know what they were talking about. An eavesdropper would no doubt think they were talking about a chicken, or a pet goose. They were not.

It was still better to be cautious. "Don't talk about it

here," Carver ordered. "In fact, don't talk about it until we're at the Compound, in the study, and all the servants are downstairs asleep."

"People will find out someday." Jowan insisted.

"I know. It's important to keep it secret until we've got it right and nobody dares interfere. Anyway, we'll be back for the hatching. That's what matters."

Jowan smiled, and then they walked on in silence, thinking about their grand scheme; the one that would put the Wardens back in the sky where they belonged. Tara, who had witnessed Bronwyn's death by dragon, had reservations about it, but Avernus was obsessed with it, fascinated by the story of Bronwyn's first ride on a dragon down in the Architect's secret caverns. They had investigated, and found that some of the dragons had survived. If darkspawn could raise dragons, Grey Wardens certainly could.

Carver thought it a brilliant idea. It was the death of the Archdemon, not the flight itself, that had killed Bronwyn, after all. He had been there on another occasion to see her successfully ride a dragon and live.

Wyverns were useful in combat, but they were neither as big as mature dragons, nor did they fly as well. They had really not done all that well against the Archdemon in combat, though they might be of some use in the Deep Roads. However, a High Dragon against a High Dragon? Or a flight of them? *That* should do some damage.

Breeding tame dragons was not easy, but much of the work



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had been done for them already by the Architect's minions over the past several decades. The Architect had enthralled some of the beasts – the ones who had the greatest predisposition to be domesticated. The fierce, the wayward, he had killed. Avernus read the notebooks and did likewise. Most of the little dragonlings were still pretty aggressive, but each generation was better socialized, and now they were imprinting on humans to some extent. Based on the Architect's experiments with rats, there was a threshold at the eighth generation at which point all the resulting offspring would be tame. It took ten years for a dragon to be mature enough to reproduce. A very intelligent and amenable dragon named Malea was of the seventh generation. Her eggs would be the first clutch of the eighth. High in the Coast Mountains, not far from Soldier's Peak, was a large cavern, warmed by a hot spring. Malea was established there, cared for by Ostap and some new recruits. Ostap had a healthy respect for dragons, but no superstitious dread of them. He had ridden one himself, however briefly, and lived to tell the tale. It would still be years before the dragons were large enough to carry a rider. Then...

Carver glimpsed Bryland House, and walked a little faster. He would have just enough time to see Mother and Emma, and then he would need to hurry to wash and dress. At the front gate, Jowan paused only briefly.

"I'll see you at the Compound."

"Come on in for a moment. I won't be long."

"No. This is family. Let's go, Lily." The mage gave him a



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wry smile and walked on, up the King's Way toward the Palace. Lily looked back at them, and then followed.

Carver wanted to tell Jowan to wait; that he was family, too; that he regarded him as just as much his brother as Adam – and a more likable, trustworthy brother, at that. But Jowan was already striding away, head down, and Carver preferred not to make a ridiculous scene in front of his mother's house.

So, instead, he presented himself at the brass-studded front door, and was admitted by the servant on duty. Without warning, a miniature warrior burst from the cover of an potted plant and hurled herself at his legs. Magister jumped, barking, fond of the little human. She knew how to play.

"Carver! I got you! I got you!"

He picked up his little sister, swinging her into his arms.

"You did. And what's this?" He rapped his knuckles on the pot over her head.

"Ow! My helmet, silly. But it doesn't have wings. I want a helmet with wings!" She pushed the pot off, and it fell to the floor with a clang.

Emma was a very pretty little girl, even allowing for brotherly partiality. She was an attractive mix of the best of the Amells and the Brylands, which was pretty attractive material to begin with. Her dark hair curled softly, like Bethany's, and she had her halfsister Habren's large grey eyes, starred with long black lashes. They were rather like Bronwyn's eyes, in fact, except for the color, but



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Bronwyn had been born with grey eyes. Carver had not known her then. Emma was just as closely related to Bronwyn as Habren was, and it had been agreed that the two cousins somewhat resembled each other. Well, so people said. Carver had never seen much resemblance, because he had never seen Bronwyn expressing petty spite, and he had never seen Habren expressing much of anything else.

"Who were you fighting today, mighty battlemaiden Emma?"

"Ogres," Emma said, with frank honesty, pointing at the potted plant. "I hate ogres."

"So do I. I brought you a present."

"Show me, please!"

"Let's sit down."

He found a bench and sat, shifting Emma's weight onto his lap, and sliding his bag from his shoulder. Emma reached out to pet the mabari.

"Nice Magister," she crooned. "Good boy. I like you even better than Hunter!"

Magister agreed. He had always suspected that both he and his human were superior to Hunter and his. They were *Wardens*, after all. The human pup was perceptive.

"I got you this," said Carver, showing her the little mabari.

"That's Scout!" Emma declared. She frowned adorably, remembering another black mabari she knew. "Or is it Lily?"

"It's yours. You can name your mabari whatever you like."

"Thank you, Carver," she said, well drilled in manners.

"I wish he was real."



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"Until you imprint a puppy of your own, this will have to do," he declared. Even as indulgent as Mother and the boys were, they knew Emma was far too young to train a mabari.

"All right. He has black hair. I'll call him... Loghain!"

Carver felt himself laughing and turning red at once, unable to make himself explain why she ought not to name a toy dog after the Hero of River Dane and King of Ferelden. Loghain himself would probably have been amused. He had been present at Emma's naming, and had even once held her in his arms, but she would not remember him, obviously.


"My dog Loghain." Emma murmured contentedly, "We'll have adventures together when *I'm* a Girl Warden."

It was possible, Carver supposed. He hoped for the best for his little sister. She could choose worse than to model herself after Bronwyn Cousland, that bright falling star.

Loghain had warned them that every generation faces its own challenges. All they could hope was that in every generation heroes would rise to meet them.

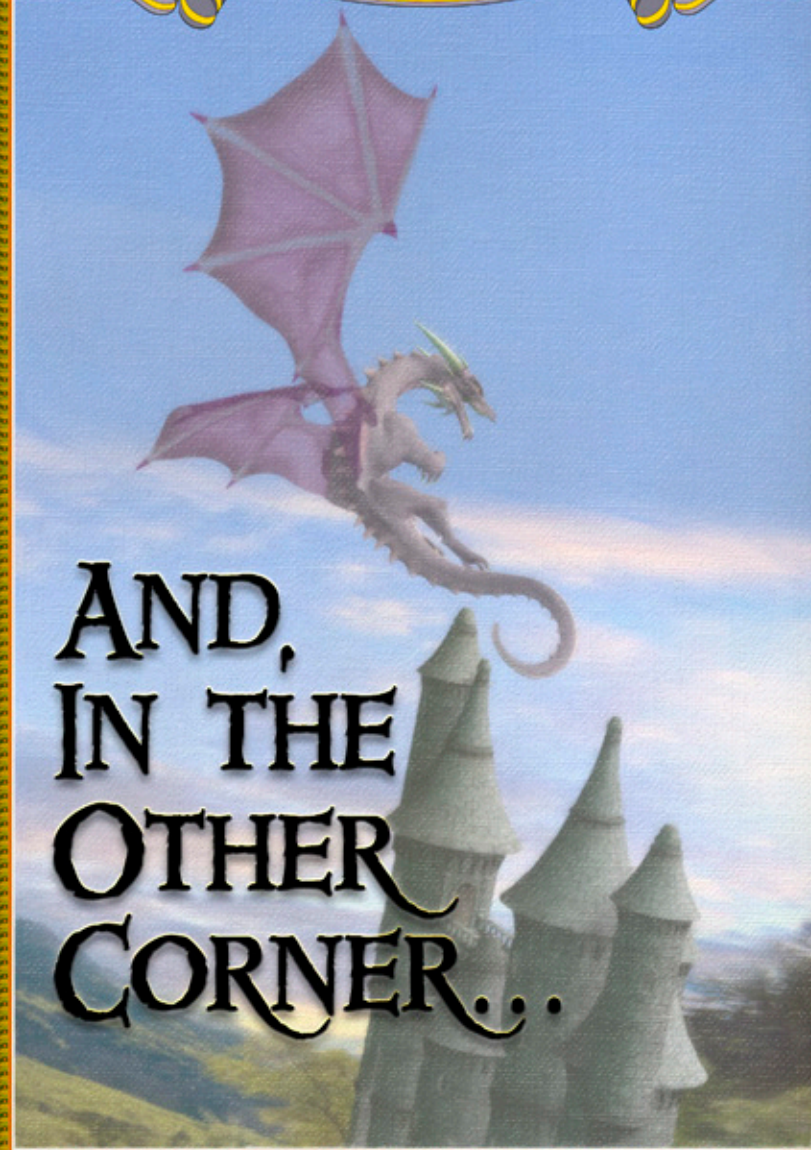
"Emma... let me tell you a story about a girl who made friends with a dragon..."

THE END
OF THE FIRST PROPOSAL





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AND,
IN THE
OTHER
CORNER...



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CHAPTER 25B

T

ALTERNATIVE: BLOOD OF THE DRAGON

THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE ARCHDEMON WAS LOW AND SLOW, VIOLET FLAMES BLOOMING FROM THE DRAGON'S BELLOWING MAW.

By the light of the fires in the city and the burning grass on the plain, people could see the little figures on the creature's back, even to the glitter of their spears. Those with spyglasses, like First Warden Wildauer and Hector Pentaghast, could see the red armor worn by the Warden on the dragon's neck.

A pair of Tevinter mages remained posted on their lookout mound, disgruntled at being left behind. Now they were glad to be in a prime position to observe the Archdemon's demise. They even saw two of the Wardens tumble into the sea.

"Bad luck!" cried one of them, younger and more empathetic than the rest.

His friend shrugged. "Maybe they can swim, Julian. It wasn't far to fall."



As Bronwyn's spear penetrated the Archdemon's brain, a shaft of unearthly light speared up into the heavens. It expanded into

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a gigantic white blossom that illumined the night sky like daylight. The boom that followed shook the walls of Val Royeaux.

"Oh," Athis murmured, gazing in awe. "That's what they meant by a 'bright light.'"

"It's... pretty bright," Pentaghost croaked. "Forget the darkspawn for now. We've got to see this."

Those remaining at the top of the tower now had to find a way to get down again. Between them and their friends on the ground was a spiral staircase of iron and bronze held by darkspawn.

Tara had a sudden inspiration. She rushed after Alistair, yelling "Stand back!" and released a blue-white bolt of lightning.

It sizzled down the staircase, curving, curving in an elegant helix; electrocuting nearly all of the darkspawn there. Tainted bodies jerked and shuddered away. Some remained in place, dead bodies rigid, eyes bulging, smoke rising from the top of their heads.

"Good job!" Alistair shouted, impressed. He and Carver knocked dead darkspawn aside as they raced to the bottom. Not all were dead, though, and they fought back savagely. The smoke of the burnt darkspawn obscured the way. Blades slashed out of nowhere; arrows whistled past.

They were almost to the ground when a shock wave shook the tower, making them stumble. Alistair got out the door first. They were just in time to see the huge churning fireball low to the north. Under the stars, a dragon fell

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from the sky, spewing the last of its fire, and the fireball dissipated slowly into dark smoke.

"Bronwyn!" Alistair shouted, echoed by Tara, almost simultaneously.

By this time all the darkspawn in the cathedral courtyard were dead. More lurked in the compound itself: in the Cathedral itself, in the sullied gardens, in the scriptorium, in the dormitories. They would be hunted down eventually. Nor were all the Broodmothers dead. There were more nests: in deep chambers under great mansions, in the dungeons of the Palace, and further down, down, in the Deep Roads, where many of the captives had been dragged.

But at that moment, no one had anything on their minds but rushing out to see what had happened to the Archdemon.

Morrigan thought she had planned for every possible contingency; yet at this moment — a moment that should have been one of triumph — she felt her schemes unraveling. She had believed that her ritual would benefit all her friends, and prided herself on her cleverness. She had never expected Bronwyn to end up on the back of a dragon, flying above the earth. Her friend would survive the death of the Archdemon: there was a strong possibility that she would not survive the subsequent fall. The Avvar tumbled into the sea. A little later, Brosca slid away. Morrigan shrieked in frustration, flying ever faster to keep up.

If only she had confided in Bronwyn! If only she had

told her that she could both kill the Archdemon and survive. With a little prudence, Bronwyn would understand that she should disable the dragon; force it to land. She could then slay it and reap all the rewards. She might not like it, but surely, given time, she would see reason...

But Bronwyn did not *know* that she should force the dragon to land. Bronwyn expected to die either in the air or on the ground, and there was no way for Morrigan to inform her otherwise now. Anders would be angry: he would feel betrayed. Even though she trusted in her power over her lover, Morrigan did not relish the thought of the coming confrontation. For that matter, she was genuinely distressed that all these worthless Wardens had proved so ineffectual that Bronwyn must die to save the day.

That burst of emotion forced out a shrill "*creel!*" and she veered a little closer to the failing Archdemon, trying to think of some way to distract Bronwyn. Riordan was still stabbing at the dragon, bracing himself against the wing joint as he tried to pierce the hide. He startled a little as the little hawk flashed by. His spear slid up, slicing neatly through a tendon. The Archdemon shrieked, its wing almost useless.

It could not flap to gain height; it could only soar. Obviously falling to the earth would be fatal, and reconstituting itself would be time-consuming and painful. The Archdemon tilted forward into a descent. It would land far from the Wardens, kill the two attackers, and trust to its ability to heal rapidly.

The tilt dislodged Riordan from his safe position. He lost his

footing and dangled from the anchor strap, snarling curses. Bronwyn's stomach heaved again as the ground rushed up toward them. She swayed back as if a giant hand pushed at her whole body, and then as the flight leveled off, she was able to lean into her spear again. The butt of the weapon skittered off her breastplate to the left. She gripped it closer to the head, pushing hard. Dark dragonblood spurting out, and Bronwyn got a mouthful. It was heady, burning, hot and thrilling... intoxicating. She swallowed and thrust again, with a shout.

Dazzling light was a physical presence. She saw nothing else, and accepted that she was seeing her death.

Beautiful, she thought. *At least it's beautiful.*

The bellowing of the Archdemon vibrated up through her legs, shaking her body. The light enveloped her — And then the shock wave struck.

Riordan slammed back against the dragon's body, but the strap held. The blow stunned him. Bronwyn was likewise unconscious, slumped to the side. The birds tumbled, helpless and blinded, until they thumped onto the ground. Morrigan landed harder, but at the short distance on loose, excavated earth had only bruises. Anders, further away, managed better, but still huddled in a little hollow for a moment, dazed.

The dragon skidded into the ground at a shallow angle, bounced ponderously, and then plowed on, leaving a huge scar on the Blighted ground far beyond the Wardens' lines, even beyond the ravine where the baggage train lay concealed. When it finally stopped, the dragon's tail twitched

once, and then it lay still. Riordan was saved from the worst of it by the outstretched wing. Bronwyn was violently bruised when the stop threw her forward against the spiny vertebrae. Another jolt slammed her head against the dragon's skull. Not even the nasal piece could spare her a broken nose. The winged helmet saved her life, but rattled her brains. The last jolt knocked the helmet completely off her head, and it tumbled away, unregarded. She lay still, sprawled out over the Archdemon's head.

The first to understand that he was still alive, Anders gingerly shifted into human form, and rushed toward the vast bulk of the Archdemon. Hardly daring to hope, he scrambled up and pressed his fingers into Bronwyn's neck.

"Thank you, Maker! Thank you, Maker!" he babbled, and then remembered that the Maker had absolutely nothing to do with it. He had to get to Morrigan, but first he took a quick look at Bronwyn, who had sustained some bad damage from the impact, even protected by her dragon armor. She was obviously concussed. Unstrapping her would be tricky alone. Instead, he gathered his mana for a powerful healing spell, and hoped that would hold her for the time being. From the back of the Archdemon, he could see distant figures running out of the north gate. He hoped they were not darkspawn.

Sliding down on the other side, he found Riordan, badly injured. Another concussion, a dislocated shoulder, and quite serious contusions from what looked like being

dragged over rough ground. Another spell for him, and then Anders only had eyes for Morrigan.

"Morrigan!"

The hawk answered with a faint "cree!" Anders stumbled over to her.

"It's not bad," he assured her quickly. "Really not bad. Nothing seems broken, but you'll have some colorful bruises. Don't try to shift back... not until I heal you again."

The discomfort of knitting tissues caused her to cry out again, but she immediately looked better, and then lay trembling. Very carefully, Anders picked her up and carried her over to the Archdemon's half-opened wing. He laid her down gently, and cast a third healing spell. Then he turned to the others.

Riordan was easier to get to. Anders unbuckled the Orlesian and eased him back, scowling over the broken bones.

A horrible thought came to him: the Wardens would expect a Warden to die killing the Archdemon. If no one was dead, there would be curiosity and recriminations and even the suspicion that the Archdemon was not, in fact, dead.

Anders could make that problem go away if Riordan did not survive. A simple spell, undoing his healing, would kill the Orlesian quickly and painlessly.

But he could not do it. Anders had killed in battle, but he had never murdered in cold blood. Mostly especially, he had never considered murdering a faithful friend who had been nothing but generous and helpful himself. If it had been another other Orlesian, or a Templar, Anders might

have been tempted to simplify matters, but he could not bring himself to kill Riordan. Ashamed of himself for even considering it, he worked on healing the man's broken ribs.

The two young Tevinters on the scene confirmed that he would, first, do no harm.

"Some of them might be alive!" shouted Vyraco. "Hurry!"

The lifted torches gave better light than the half-hidden moon. Anders glanced up to see the two lights bobbing closer.

"Morrigan!" he whispered. "Fly away if you can. They're bound to ask questions. Find Loghain and tell him Bronwyn's alive!"

She felt much better and stronger, and took flight at once, winging swiftly away to the south. She was sore, but not in disabling pain, and her heart was singing in triumph. Only a few moments later, the young Tevinters, stumbling over the rough ground, caught sight of Anders.

"I can't believe anyone survived that!" Julian burst out. "That's amazing!"

Anders called to them. "Are you Healers? I could use some help here."

Pleased that the foreigner was a mage, one said, "I am Julian Merulus, and this is my friend Vyraco. I'm a Healer. Vyraco will have to hold the torches."

"Actually," Anders said, sizing up Vyraco's greater strength. "He can help me get *her* – " he pointed to Bronwyn still tangled in her straps " – down from there."

"She slew the Archdemon?" Vyraco asked. "She's dead?"

"Not yet," Anders said grimly.

"But how – "

"We'll figure it out later! For now let's just help her! I'm Anders, by the way."

Dragon scale did not burn, obviously. Vyraco laid his torch on the Archdemon's side and clambered up after Anders.

It was tricky, trying to unravel the intertwined leather belts. Anders finally drew a knife and cut through them. Then they eased Bronwyn away, sliding her left leg over the dragon's limp neck. Julian peered up at them. Bronwyn's face was dark with blood. It masked her features; she scarcely looked human.

"Is her skull cracked?"

"Could be," Anders said. "Some of the blood is from a broken nose, and some from a scalp wound." He laid her down beside Riordan, and felt the skull bones carefully. With a murmured spell, he fixed the broken nose. Then he rubbed his fingers together, feeling the wrongness of the blood's texture.

"Not all this is hers," he said. "Get me something to clean her with."

Bronwyn, still unconscious, heaved a series of coughs.

"She's got blood in her mouth," said Anders, turning her head. He gestured to Julian. "Put your torch up there and help me heal her."

"Are you sure she killed the Archdemon?" asked Vyraco. "The man is alive too."

Anders answered impatiently. "The bloody Archdemon looks pretty dead to me, and no other Archdemons have



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made an appearance. It exploded just like it's supposed to. Bronwyn's tougher than anyone I know. A spear in the brain is more like to kill a dragon than an injured wing!"

"That's *her*?" Julian asked, handing Anders some linen torn from his underrobe. "The Dragonslayer?"

"Yes. Queen Bronwyn, Warden-Commander of Ferelden. She's killed a lot of dragons. It could be that she's better at it than other people."

"She's swallowed a lot of Archdemon blood," Julian said nervously. "Who knows what could do to her?"

Anders snorted. "Along with the darkspawn blood she's drunk and the Ashes of Andraste in her system? Watch how you talk about her."

"I don't mean any disrespect," Julian assured him. "It's just...we heard some amazing things. Some Orlesian noble left a copy of a White Chantry document in Cumberland." He whispered to his friend, "That's Andraste's Champion."

"That's it!" Vyraco hissed. "She had Andraste's Ashes! That's how she did it!"

Anders suppressed a grin, remembering a quarrel he had once overheard between two drunks in a tavern.

"If the Archdemon and Andraste got in a fight, who d'you think would win?"

"The Archdemon, I reckon..."

"Ha! But Andraste can call on the MAKER!"

Thrilled at this possible rationale, Anders tried to sound casual. "That could be. The Ashes have saved her before.



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She's still badly hurt. You... Julian? I need you to work on Riordan there: punctured lung, dislocated shoulder, concussion... take your pick."

"The Dragonslayer – "

"I'll take care of Bronwyn. You look after Riordan."

He had to argue again as more Wardens crowded up, peering at his patients, poking at the Archdemon, cheering and embracing one another. As senior officers arrived, the mob scene quieted somewhat. The young Tevinters pointed out their own commander. Vyraco handed his torch to another Warden to hold and went to speak to Elagabalus.

"The Archdemon is dead, Commander, but the slayer is alive," He lowered his voice to a thrilling whisper. "It's Andraste's Champion. The Fereldan Healer isn't saying too much, but it's clear he thinks she's been saved by a dose of the Ashes of Andraste!"

Thunderstruck and fascinated, Elagabalus pushed past the happy crowd to get a good look. He recognized one of his own junior people, Julian, who was assisting another Warden. Laid out on the Archdemon's wing were a pair of wounded Wardens. One was a young woman, the other was a man in middle-age.

"Who's he?" he demanded.

"Riordan of Orlais," Anders replied, not looking up.

Elagabalus did not wish to interfere with a Healer, but reached out delicately with his own magic to confirm that the Archdemon was utterly and completely dead, and



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the humans present were not. An intriguing – if worrying – situation. Had the Archdemon's soul been destroyed, or would they presently see another, living Archdemon rising up, taking shape from a possessed darkspawn? If it were going to happen, surely it would have happened by now, based on all he had read...

More Wardens arrived. Here was Pentaghost, a little ahead of the others. Excited Wardens were rushing to him with the news. Ah, there was the First Warden. Such a conundrum. What ought they to do? Were they sure the young Fereldan woman was the slayer? He himself had seen others falling from the Archdemon. Could one have struck a last, lethal blow, and then the dying Archdemon had coasted in, crashing to its death? That was not an impossible scenario. Credit should be given where it was due, not offered as a tribute to glamor. Elagabalus forsook some measured, reasoned debate. Everyone would have to be thoroughly examined.

By the time the First Warden was gazing at the scene, the air was full of gossip about "*Andraste's Champion!*" and "*Saved by the Sacred Ashes!*" and "*A miracle!*" Even the Rivainnis, who were not all Andrasteans, had eagerly joined in the rumors.

"Andraste's Ashes saved her?" the First Warden demanded. "Is that even *possible?*"

Julian whispered to his own commander, "And she swallowed some Archdemon blood. We all know what dragon's blood can do."

Elagabalus did know. He had been involved in some



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research delving into the various uses of dragon's blood. It was an immensely powerful restorative. Combined with the Ashes, it could well have caused unforeseen phenomena.

Pentaghost climbed up on the dragon, examining its wounds. "Who was up here?" he asked.


To Anders' exasperation, Wardens were climbing all over the corpse, doing a postmortem to determine the exact cause of death.

"Watch out!" he snapped. "Don't trample the wounded, you dozy idiots! Can't this wait for first light?"

"Alas, no," the First Warden said, deigning to speak to the Fereldan mage. "The blood must be retrieved and the facts established as quickly as possible. If we are in danger from a resurrection of the Archdemon – "

"It's *dead!*"

" – or from some new danger, that must be ascertained immediately."



Loghain did not wait for the end. He was already pushing ahead like a one-man battering ram, the route to the Gate of the Moon vivid in his mind's-eye.

"Out the way! Out of the bloody way! You! Sten! Get the golems, and let's get out there!"

The dogs, not quite understanding what was happening, but comprehending fully that he was upset, ran at his side.

Sten grasped the urgency of the moment. "Golems! Form a wedge and force your way through."



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The darkspawn melted before the golem's charge like butter, and fled to the north and south of the city, pressed on the other side by the Northern Wardens.

Further down the Avenue they came across a wyvern saddle, and in it, spilled onto his side, was Duke Prosper. Loghain could not be bothered with him, except to feel a spark of fierce relief that he was gone. Some Orlesians carried him to the side of the street and left him to be recovered later. The charge went on. They met the Nevarran Wardens, and a brief cheer rose, as they pushed through the gate and out onto the plain.

As the clouds scudded away, the moonlight shown bright on the plain north of the city. Clearly, this had been the site of a great pitched battle. Some grass was burning sullenly near a vast sprawling bulk: the Archdemon.

"There!" shouted Sten.

A flutter of wings, and white breastfeathers flashed past Loghain. In an instant Morrigan stood before him, rubbing her right arm in discomfort. Loghain saw her, slender and pale in the moonlight, and was unmoved by her beauty. He took a heavy step toward her, racked by questions he did not want to frame.

She spoke first, saving him from that.

"Bronwyn lives."

It was the best, the kindest, the quickest way to tell him. She gave him a moment to catch his breath and command himself, and above the gasps of relief and cries of joy, she went on.

"Bronwyn lives, and Riordan lives, and the Archdemon




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is dead. The First Warden, I dare say, is somewhat puzzled, and everyone is asking questions. Bronwyn is unconscious, but Anders is with her. Perhaps you should join them, lest the First Warden and the Tevinter mages take her apart to see what she is made of."

"Jowan!" snarled Loghain. "I need a wyvern!"



Not just one wyvern, but three paced swiftly across the plains to the body of the Archdemon. Tara, Jowan, and Morrigan ran along at a gait smoother than ice, bringing as many as they could carry to confront the northern Wardens. The dogs ran barking in their wake, and the golems, astonishingly swift for beings of stone and metal, thundered behind. Nevarrans and Andermen backed away in alarm. Tevinters and Rivannis wondered aloud. At first they had feared they were dragon thralls, but these were clearly wyverns, and on the back of the foremost was a big warrior in silverite plate who was no Warden.

"King Loghain!" Anders called. "She's here! She's going to be all right!"

"Riordan's there, too?" called Minjonet.

"He is. He's still out, but the bones will mend."

Loghain was utterly indifferent to the Orlesian. He slid from the wyvern's back, ignoring the ocean of awe rippling through the crowd, and went to Bronwyn at once. A Tevinter obligingly held up a torch so he could see her. Scout darted forward, frantic, and sniffed at his Bronwyn, whining. He licked at her face,



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which was still smeared with Archdemon blood.

"She's going to be all right, old boy," Anders said soothingly, whether to Loghain or Scout, it was unclear. "She got jolted around pretty badly, and she cracked her face against the Archdemon's skull, but there's nothing that can't be fixed."

Loghain crouched down by Bronwyn, eyes fixed on her. Some of the blood had been cleared away, and her nose was set, but shadowy bruises darkened her brow and cheekbones. Stripping off a gauntlet, Loghain traced a finger along her jaw, wanting to feel the warmth of life to reassure himself.

"Of course..." the First Warden said into the turbulent, excited crowd. "Of course we are relieved at the survival of our sister and brother, but many questions remain."

The whispers of "*Andraste's Champion!*" and "*The Sacred Ashes!*" rose again. Anders slipped over between Tara and Jowan and whispered a warning.

"They think that the Ashes saved her. It could be true. She handled, smelled, and ingested some, after all. She also swallowed almost a pint of Archdemon blood. That might have something to do with it, too."

Tara, in wyvern form, refrained from crunching Anders in her jaws, but it was difficult. Did the idiot not anticipate how suspicious Bronwyn's survival would be? Half of them might even think that the Archdemon was not really dead.

Loghain could think of nothing but getting Bronwyn out of the night air and away from the Archdemon.

"That may be!" he replied. "But my queen requires care.



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The beast is dead, and the darkspawn put to flight. My people are exhausted and must rest. We shall return to our quarters in the city now, and perhaps in the morning we can find answers to your questions."

Stooping, he gathered Bronwyn up in his arms, and laid her on Jowan's back, settling her carefully between the spine ridges.

"Bear her carefully," he commanded. Zevran tugged on Adaia, and they slipped down from Tara's back, making a place for Riordan. Once the wounded were situated, they headed slowly back toward the city. Loghain walked beside Bronwyn, his hand on her, keeping her balanced. The jubilant Wardens returned to Val Royeaux in the strangest parade ever seen by the Gate of the Moon.

The First Warden was quite put out. "But..."

"Perhaps tomorrow is for the best," Hector Pentaghast said, speaking a little louder. "Perhaps Queen Bronwyn and our brother Riordan will be able to join us then." He bowed to the departing Fereldan Wardens.

"Gather the blood first," Elagabalus ordered his mages. "We can process everything else later. The blood is essential and much be as fresh as possible."

There was much to be done. Teams hauled the barrels and kegs to the dead Archdemon, while other Wardens examined the dragon, finishing their analysis of events. While they were talking, a quite horrible idea occurred to Elagabalus. He nearly shouted it out, but in the current circumstances, that would lead to a pitched battle. There was another way.



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Elgabalus caught Julian by the sleeve and hissed a command. "Be subtle. Go after the Fereldans and give them every assistance. Examine the Queen carefully. You must find out if she is with child. If so, she *must* miscarry. Do you understand?"

Even in the night, he could see the boy's eyes open wide and white. "Could that – ?"

"It could. She might well be unaware of it herself. Do not ask her! I hope I am wrong, but if I am not, that child cannot be permitted to live. It is for the Queen's own safety. Go."

The other commanders remained for a time – even Visconti and Sainsby – making introductions and discussing the battle and the fall of the Archdemon.

"It is dead, isn't it?" asked Sainsby. "It hasn't risen again, and surely there wouldn't be such a display for a mere transfer."

Visconti was worried. "But the slayer lives. It's true that she won some Ashes. I even spoke to a woman who was with her, but I thought..." His thought faded into silence. He might have misunderstood Warden Leliana about the amount and disposition of the Ashes, and did not wish to muddy the waters.

Pentaghost looked at the short, sharp spears that had been retrieved from the corpse. Quite fine work, as were the spring-loaded anchors that had kept them secure.

"The death can almost certainly be attributed to Queen Bronwyn, as she was found next to the spear in its brain. No doubt all the Wardens who participated in the attack have some share in the kill – and Riordan's efforts clearly disabled it and brought it down – but the actual cause of



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death must be the head wound. Technically, then, we must consider Queen Bronwyn the slayer of the Archdemon. Of course, we must hear the survivors' stories at length."

"And listen for what they do *not* tell us," muttered the First Warden's aide. His chief glanced at him and nodded.

"Maybe it was one of the Wardens who fell..." Sainsby theorized. "We saw that two fell from the creatures back into the sea. Maybe one of them threw the spear and the landing drove it in further."

"But if they were already dead, the Archdemon's soul would not go to them," objected Pentaghost.

"They might not have been dead," Sainsby replied. "They might have been swimming. Falling into the ocean isn't an inevitable death sentence, after all. Maybe the slayer survived long enough in the water for the death of the Archdemon to kill him."

"This is all very unclear," Visconti complained, shaking his head. "But who knows? Perhaps past events were also confused, and we know only the cleaned-up story that our predecessors committed to parchment."

"But the theory is sound," the First Warden disagreed. "It is the only thing that makes sense."

Elagabalus held up his hand, thinking hard.

"The theory is based on a very small number of events. Perhaps a different individual, with different abilities or very great strength of will, might successfully resist the onslaught of the Archdemon's soul, consigning it to the Beyond. We



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should not be too hide-bound, or close our minds to special circumstances. It is true that Queen Bronwyn has been exposed to an unusual number of magical substances. It is obviously true that she possesses great strength of will. There could be yet another explanation, however."

"And that is?" First Warden Wildauer demanded, confused and exasperated, wishing that none of this had happened in his lifetime.

"Queen Bronwyn is a young woman... and a wife. If she were to be with child..."

"Maker's Breath!" shouted Pentaghast, horrified.

"I only suggest it as a possibility," Elagabalus continued, "and I have sent an excellent Healer to ascertain whether or not it is so."

Visconti could hardly manage to voice his question. "Are you suggesting that an Archdemon could be growing inside her? That is..." He was unable to find words.

"Not an Archdemon, necessarily," Elagabalus. "The Old God Urthemiel instead, perhaps. The fact that Bronwyn is herself a Warden complicates the issue. Were she not a Warden, but the spouse of one, it is clear that the child would be cleansed of the Taint. Since the mother herself is Tainted, that is not so clear-cut."

"I need a drink," Sainsby said frankly. "And a meal. And some sleep. I'm going back to the Warden headquarters in the city. Enzo, are you coming?"

"Yes... yes..." said the Antivan, still sick with horror. "But



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ought we not to warn her?"

"She is unconscious and wounded," said Pentaghast. "After such a shock, it is likely that she would lose any child she carried. Why torture her with something that is only a supposition? Have the Healer determine her condition. Ten to one we are worrying about nothing. Female Wardens do not conceive easily."

"That's true," sighed the First Warden, "though it still leaves us with unanswered questions."

"We are not likely to find the answers tonight," said Sainsby. "The morning is wiser than the evening."

"Then let us meet here tomorrow morning," said the First Warden. Meetings and conferences were things he understood well. And he was too tired to think, himself.



While the Wardens of Tevinter and Weisshaupt swarmed over the Archdemon, draining the precious blood from the corpse and stripping away hide and scales, Julian hurried after the Fereldans.

"Let me help you," he begged Anders. "I can't sleep without knowing if they're all right."

Anders understood what it was like to worry about a patient, and gave the boy a brief smile, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Is it all right with your commander?"

"He said I could please myself," lied the boy. "We have plenty of Healers with us... but this is *history!*"

"All right. We took over a big mansion in the Place Reville.



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You can join us there. We'll want to clear more space for Riordan. I don't know about Bronwyn. Loghain might want her brought to his own headquarters. In fact, nothing more likely. Riordan mostly needs sleep at this point."

"I'm worried about the Queen's concussion," the boy said. "If there's blood on the brain – "

"Fine, you can assist me," Anders agreed, sympathetic toward anyone who cared about Bronwyn.

"Listen," Julian murmured, moving closer. "How did you get out there to them so fast? *You* weren't on the dragon, were you? How did you get to them so quickly?"

Anders shook his head. "I really can't say..."

The boy lowered his voice. "Was it *teleportation*?" he whispered. "Have you mastered *teleportation* in the far south? We have heard that the ancient elves had devices that allowed them to travel over great distances, but the lore is lost."

"I don't know anything about teleportation," Anders said sharply. He was not sure what he ought to say about shape-shifting, especially to a Tevinter. Morrigan was right there, in her wyvern form, no doubt hearing the entire conversation. They walked back through the city, and now and then Anders checked Bronwyn and Riordan's condition. The Orlesian was showing signs of responsiveness. His eyelids flickered, and now and then he uttered a soft groan and some unintelligible words. Bronwyn was still profoundly unconscious.

Everyone was exhausted, of course. While there were



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still darkspawn in the city, they had been driven from the Place Reville, the Palace, the market, the cathedral courtyard, and the two major gate areas. The Avenue of the Sun was fairly secure, as long as one traveled with armed companions. Minimal guards could keep occasional forays at bay. The darkspawn were leaderless and nearly imbecilic: that did not mean they were not dangerous.

Loghain certainly did not care about cleaning out the entire city. That was a job for the Wardens. More accurately, it was a job for Wardens not from Ferelden. Those had already done their duty. As soon as Bronwyn was fit to travel, they were leaving this foul place. He wondered if he could get away with putting her on one of Isabela's ships. Probably not.

It was a long, long walk to the Place Reville, longer coming back than going out. Soldiers' steps dragged on the cobblestones, and pikes scraped along listlessly. Even those on watch would not be able to function for more than an hour or so at a time.

Loghain insisted that Bronwyn be brought to his own headquarters: a once-splendid mansion facing the open square. A room had been cleared for him that seemed fairly decent. Obviously, the darkspawn had not been in every room in Val Royeaux – nor even every building. Parts of the upstairs here were merely dusty, and an orderly had taken care of that.

Once they reached the Place Reville, the wounded were carefully unloaded from the wyverns, and Riordan taken



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to the Warden's house and Bronwyn to headquarters. Then the wyverns shifted back to human shape. Julian nearly fell down, between the shock of seeing such magic and the curious change in air pressure created by the transformation of so much mass.

"Shape-shifting?" he gabbled, clutching Anders arm. Much was now explained. The Fereldans *did* have impressive powers of their own.

Anders had no time for magical theory. "We have work to do," he said. "Come on."

Leliana came with them, wanting to help, and among them they managed to unbuckle Bronwyn's armor, unfasten her underpadding, and get her washed. The Orlesian mansion had an inner courtyard, with a fountain that the darkspawn had not yet found and Tainted. In the cellar was a well, too, with good water. Everyone drank thirstily. Julian worked hard and uncomplainingly, awaiting his chance to do a pregnancy scan. Loghain helped where he could, but was too busy with his officers to be able to spend every minute with his injured young wife. Finally, Anders and Leliana were distracted by the sound of heavy footsteps outside on the pavement. Leliana looked out the window.

"It's Shale!"

Anders looked too. In the torchlight, the shape and size of the golem were unmistakable. So too was the armor worn by the body in its arms.


"And Astrid."



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Even at this distance, it was clear that the injuries had been fatal. They ran down the stairs and out into the square. While they were gone, Julian performed his painstaking scan. A dead Warden was no concern of his, but the living were profoundly interesting.



The murmur of gossip grew to a roar. A crowd gathered, with more and more dwarves. In short order, the events in the Cathedral became known. The nest under the Cathedral was destroyed, but Paragon Astrid and her party had perished. Others had been caught in the collapse. Shale had not been hurt, of course, and was able to clear some of the rubble and retrieve the Paragon, whom Shale had greatly respected.

The dwarves were quite devastated by the fate of Astrid. Much of the interest in the Archdemon and the deeds of the Queen were diverted to other, more specifically dwarven interests. The Paragon must obviously be given to the Stone in Orzammar. The Archdemon had been slain, and thus the Blight was over and with it any obligations the dwarves had to the Grey Wardens. They must return to Orzammar as soon as possible. Piotin Aeducan wasted no time in seeking out Loghain and demanding to speak to him.



It finally occurred to Anders that he had put Morrigan in terrible danger. It also occurred to him that she had put *both* herself and him in terrible danger with her schemes. There was no way that Tara was going to think any of this was a



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good idea, and Tara's lover was a trained assassin...

He had been up a great deal of the night, caring for Bronwyn, but some time after midnight, she began breathing more normally, and fell into a proper sleep. The fractures seemed to be healing quickly, and no pressure was being exerted on her brain.

The Tevinter Julian had done well, too, and had eventually left, saying, "I desperately need sleep. My commander will wonder what I've been up to. May we meet again soon."

He bowed in the old-fashioned Tevinter manner, excited at the prospect of making his report: his very *satisfactory* report. The Fereldan Queen was not with child. It was possible that she had miscarried in the past — there were signs his magic detected — but she was healing with astonishing rapidity, even for a Warden, and no parasitical life could be detected. She would be waking soon. No doubt she would wish to have familiar faces about her.

Anders was glad to see him go. He must speak to Morrigan. Soon after, the proud shape of a hawk was silhouetted against the red and purple dawn. Morrigan slipped through the window, and stood gazing down at Bronwyn.

"She looks much better."

"I think she'll wake soon. She seems fine. Maybe that dose of Ashes Tara gave her awhile back made the difference. I'm a little worried about all the Archdemon blood she swallowed. I hope it doesn't turn her into a raving berserker!"

"'Twould make her better able to cope with Loghain!"



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Morrigan said tartly.

Anders braced himself, and then said, "Loghain is not the most serious problem at the moment. I think Tara might suspect..."

Morrigan glared at him. "What?"

Anders bumbled on. "...I think she might suspect us of performing rituals that caused things not to work out exactly as planned."

Morrigan exploded. "You fool! You told her, didn't you? You *talked*. You cannot be kept from *talking!*"

"I was worried!" Anders protested. "I was afraid for you! I wanted a second opinion, and Tara knows lots of exotic magic. She thought it was a terrible idea — for your sake — and told me I should talk you out of it. Obviously," he gave her a weak smile. "I failed."

Very alarmed, Morrigan saw all the dangers in a moment. "And now she will go tattling to the Wardens... to Bronwyn... to our companions... to the assassin! Do you understand what they would do to me?"

"I won't let them!"

"Fool," she muttered again, thinking hard. "I shall defend myself. We must allay their suspicions, and it would be best for me to leave this place as quickly as possible." She bit her lip, and then her eye fell on the bloody mass of the towels that had been used to clean Bronwyn. "I have an idea..."

Loghain came in shortly thereafter to see if Bronwyn was awake. He found Anders and Morrigan in quiet con-



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versation. The witch seemed ill and exhausted.

"Are you all right?"

Morrigan attempted to draw herself up into a simulacrum of her usual haughty self.

"I am perfectly well," she declared. "'Tis only... 'tis only..."

Blood dripped onto the floor from between her legs, and she crumpled into Anders' arms.



The Wardens awakened slowly the following morning, recovering from wounds and overexertion. They were tired and sore, grieving for the dead, but elated at their victory. The first up had managed to make some sort of gruesome porridge, which, being Wardens, everyone gobbled down regardless of how it tasted or smelled.

"The Rivainnis claim they saw another wyvern — a live one — in addition to the mangled corpse near the Gate of the Moon." said Quinn.

Nuala and Steren looked at each other. "The dead wyvern was the shemlen noble's pet. Velanna must be somewhere in the city. We must find her and help her return to her proper form!"

"R-r-r-ight," Quinn said slowly. "Be careful, though. She might turn on you."

The Dalish couple looked briefly miserable. The loss of Danith still grieved them, and now, for Velanna to be trapped in the body of a beast... alone, confused... it was too much. It was truly terrible.



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"We shall search for her, nonetheless," Steren affirmed.

Alistair joined the other early risers. "Some of us are supposed to meet with the First Warden this morning. I don't know why they can't wait for Bronwyn to be up. Riordan, too, for that matter. What are they trying to pull?"

Carver yawned. "Maybe they're still trying to figure out what happened. Last night certainly proved a blow to ages of treasured lore."

Alistair spooned up the lumpy porridge. "If the Archdemon were still alive, we'd know it by now. And that light and that explosion... well, it couldn't have happened for anything less than the Archdemon being dead as week-old mutton."

Quinn said, "The dwarves say the Archdemon is gone and the Blight is over. They're pulling out today. I heard Kardol talking to some of his men. They want to take Astrid home to Orzammar for a state funeral. They'd like to take a formal goodbye of Bronwyn, but they're going today whether she wakes or not."

"Morning, all," Adaia called out, looking half-awake.

"Where's Siofranni?" Carver asked.

"She wants to sleep in a little. She said that when she's ordered to get up, she'll get up."

"The First Warden wants to see some of us," Carver warned her. "Maybe Siofranni doesn't have to be there, though. You should be."

"Ha!" Adaia scoffed. "As if anybody's going to ask *my* opinion!"

Alistair looked at her across the table. "I'm interested in

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your opinion."

"That's because you're just too nice. Not like me."

Alistair made a face. Maybe he *was* too nice. "Anyway, I want you there, if I have to be there. Tara and Anders, too."

"Who's talking about me?" Tara asked, entering the dining room.

She and Zevran had spent the night making love in celebration, and then making plans. Now was not necessarily the time to deal with Morrigan, but it was not too early to look at their options. Failing that, Tara had told Zevran flatly that she did not want to live in Thedas if it was also going to contain Morrigan's Old God baby.

"Fortunately, *cara mia*," Zevran had pointed out. "We have alternatives, yes?"

Tara was relieved not to see Morrigan at the table. One sight of her smug expression, and she would likely curse her, no matter what the consequences. As soon as Bronwyn was awake, they were going to have to tell her what had happened. Promises were all very well, but this was a terrible danger.

Leliana came through the door, dark circles of weariness under her eyes.

"Maker!" Carver exclaimed. "Were you up all night?"

"For the most part. There was much to do. My friend Silas is dead. He was in the Cathedral with Astrid."

Adaia came forward to hug her. "I'm so sorry!"

"Such a terrible night," Leliana murmured, distracted.

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"At least Bronwyn and Riordan are alive. Morrigan, too... it is very sad."

Tara looked up. "What happened to Morrigan?"

"A heartbreaking disappointment," Leliana told her. "Poor Morrigan. She was standing there speaking to Teyrn Loghain in Bronwyn's room, when she suddenly issued a flow of blood and collapsed. She has miscarried a child!"

"Oh." Alistair did not know what to say. He disliked Morrigan, but this was a *baby*.


"Has she?" Zevran asked, exchanging a look with Tara. "Such a tragedy! She is at the King's headquarters, then?"

"No," Leliana told them. "She was really very ill, and will need quiet and rest. The King ordered that she be taken to Captain's Isabela's ship and transported to Denerim with some of the other badly wounded. It was agreed that it would be best to get her away from the Taint. She was carried down to the docks not long ago, with the rest. Anders was very distraught."

"I'm sure he was," Tara said, trying not to show how deeply, deeply relieved she was. "Perhaps they can have another child someday."

"Ah," murmured Leliana. "but it will not be the same."

"No, of course not," Zevran agreed.



The loading of the wounded onto Isabela's ships resulted in something of an exchange. The first boat to dock had a pair of passengers: one big and the other small.



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"That's Morrigan!" Brosca called out. "Morrigan! Are you hurt?"
"I... am not perfectly well," Morrigan said, staring up at the little dwarf. "We all thought you lost. It is... gratifying to be proved wrong."

"I am a strong swimmer," Ostap said, "I saw Brosca go into the water not far away. It is fortunate that she obeyed me when I told her not to struggle."

Brosca burst out into a loud laugh. "I was too frozen with fear to do anything else. I've never been in deep water before. It's salty. And cold. You won't catch me doing that again. So Big Purple is dead and the Boss is alive, too!" Brosca enthused. "We got the message from shore! Guess she was too tough for the Archdemon after all!"

"It is a great wonder," agreed Ostap. "Many of will sing of her deeds." He drew Brosca along, and bade Morrigan a courteous farewell. "May you have a peaceful voyage, with good health at the end."

"Yeah, take care of yourself," Brosca said.

"I... thank you," Morrigan managed faintly, remembering not to snap at people. She was supposed to be weak.

She was laid down in the boat with the rough tenderness that soldiers feel toward a beautiful woman who has just lost a child; and given halting, sympathetic words and awkward pats that she would not have endured in any other situation.

Even Isabela showed her some sympathy, and arranged from her to have a little box of a private cabin. Morri-




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gan assured her that everything that could be done for her, had been done, and she now only required sleep. The mage on board would have more important work to do with the wounded soldiers. Isabela did not know Morrigan, and thus saw nothing odd about the woman's generous, self-sacrificing words.

Morrigan settled into the narrow bed, her hand on her belly, smiling up at the ceiling, enjoying the gentle rocking of the ship. In a few days, she would up and about, with time to reflect on how she would continue to trick the Wardens. The voyage to Denerim would be a long one, but not as long as the march by land. By the time the rest arrived, she would have managed the feat of magic that would cause the child to be born in Drakonis, instead of Haring. And she would be careful never to confide in Anders, ever again.



Sounds came to Bronwyn dimly, as if she were underwater. The voices came closer, and she began to understand them.

"*She's waking up,*" Anders whispered.

"*Speak to her,*" Loghain said hoarsely.

Anders made a curious sound in his throat. "*I think it should be you, King Loghain. It should be you.*"

"Bronwyn?" Loghain called, his voice low. A moment's silence. "Bronwyn? You've slept long enough!"

Bronwyn tried to open her eyes, and found them disgustingly stuck together. A damp towel passed over her face, and she pushed it away irritably. It had done the



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job, however, and she blinked up at a lined, anxious face. At her side, a muzzle pressed urgently against her, Scout whimpered, tail fanning the air. She groped out to run her hand over the shining black coat.

"Loghain?" She cleared her throat. "Maker, I'm thirsty. Loghain? I'm alive?"

His expression was beyond description. Bronwyn wondered if he was actually near tears. His fingers, thick and calloused, stroked anxiously at her cheek.

"It would seem so."

She sighed. "Then Riordan died."

"No. The *Orlesian* is still alive."

She nearly sat up, head spinning, horribly frightened. Scout watched her, twitching. "Then the Archdemon got away!"

"No!" cried Anders, from outside her field of vision. "No! It's dead!"

Loghain sat down on the bed and took her gently in his arms. "The Archdemon is dead. We've won. It's over. The mages think it was the Ashes that kept you alive."

"Or all that Archdemon blood you swallowed," Anders muttered. "It certainly helped you heal a fractured skull faster than anyone I've ever treated."

Gingerly, Bronwyn reached up to touch her head. "I remember a bright light..."

Loghain snorted and held her closer. "Everyone saw that. I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm alive," she murmured, bewildered. Why should she



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be surprised? It was not the first time that the Wardens had been wrong. "I'm so hungry. And I'm *filthy*..."

"A bath is ready," Loghain told her, gesturing at a little hip bath in the corner. A silly Orlesian fancy, enameled in blue with gilded scrolls. He raised his voice, "And a meal is on the way, I believe!"

"Yes, Lord King! Directly!" answered a soldier's voice beyond the door.

Bronwyn managed a smile, looking up at Loghain, touched to see him so moved. Perhaps there was hope for them, after all. He saw her looking, and gave her a gentle kiss.

"You've done well, Dragonslayer."

"And you, Hero of River Dane. Now," she said, readying herself for the worst. "Tell me the butcher's bill."



To everyone's astonishment, within the hour, she stalked out of headquarters to show herself to the cheering troops. Scout and Amber bounded along like puppies. Outside was the dwarven supply wagon, now containing a body wrapped in silk and canvas.

"We are taking our Paragon home, Queen Bronwyn," said Piotin Aeducan. "Our work here is done. We shall go back to Orzammar and do our part to fight the tide of darkspawn there. Perhaps these surface events will give us a few years' respite."

"And we shall not forget our allies, my lord," Bronwyn promised. "Nor our friends in the Legion of the Dead," she



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added, nodding to the sturdy Kardol. "We shall stand together in the Deep Roads again someday."

"I look forward to it, Warden."

Shale and the golems were going with them.

"I came from the Deep Roads," said the golem. "At least that's where that mage Wilhelm found me. If I want to know more, I don't see I have any options other than going back. The dwarves need us, and if Caridin told you the truth — though most people are born liars — we were all dwarves once. They are not nearly so squishy, too. I think I'll like it there."

"Then my thanks and best wishes to you. Perhaps we, too, will meet again in the Deep Roads."

"Nothing more likely," agreed Shale.

They departed, and after, Bronwyn's Wardens crowded around, wanting to touch her, wanting her to talk to them, everyone happy at her survival, but grieving over those who had not been so lucky. Jowan was shedding tears, embarrassed but unable to stop. Brosca hugged her, wiping her eyes for Astrid. Ostap bowed low. Tara hugged her, too. Zevran kissed her hand.

"The world would be poorer without you, Noble One."

"Too true!" agreed Carver, almost boisterous with joy. "Come over here, Fenris, and join the glad throng. Fenris," he told Bronwyn, "stood with the Qunari, and kept back the darkspawn on the north side of the Compound."

"My thanks," Bronwyn smiled at the tall elf. "You will not find me ungrateful."



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Fenris felt himself near to blushing. "I did not do it for reward, but because it needed to be done." He knew he sounded like an ungracious prig, but Bronwyn only laughed and shook his hand.

Sten, too, was due some hearty thanks.

"I've heard," Bronwyn said, smiling, "that you were a tower of strength."

"It was a stimulating battle," Sten agreed, "and I believe that the Qunari played a not unworthy part. However, it was you, *Ashkaari*, who found a way to destroy the Archdemon."

She tried to find time to speak to everyone, for everyone needed attention. Leliana was very sad about Ser Silas, and many others were grieving for those who would not be going home.

"We're building a special pyre for the Wardens," Alistair told her, after a long embrace that had Loghain glaring at him across the Place Reville. "I'm so glad you'll be there."

Nuala, Steren, and Darach begged permission to search the east side of the city for Velanna.

Bronwyn said, "Of course you may. Don't confront her, though. If you find her, let me know, and we'll try to lure her out and confine her until she can be brought back to reason." She had little expectation of it, herself, but she was grateful to her Dalish comrades, and wished so spare them pain.

"And what's this about Morrigan?" she asked Anders. "I had no idea she was with child. I cannot tell you how sorry I am."

"Well..." Anders' expression was quite odd. "We're both young."



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"Still..." Bronwyn pressed his hand. "It's a very sad thing. I owe so much to both of you. Anything in my power..."

"I know." The mage actually grinned. "But *you're* alive. That makes it all worthwhile."

Tara's lips thinned. She would need to tell Bronwyn the whole story, but not today, when people were trying to celebrate. Then, too, the truth made public would sully Bronwyn's victory and call her honor and courage into question. When they were home and safe, and had time to reflect on the facts of the case, she would make certain Bronwyn knew exactly why she had survived. Ironically, Morrigan, profoundly selfish as she was, had saved Bronwyn while gaining nothing for herself.

Serves her right, Tara thought, with bitter spite.

And then it was time to face the First Warden and the council he had called.

Riordan would try to make the meeting, but Minjonet was going to represent him until he was able to join them. Visconti and Sainsby approached Bronwyn, almost as if they were a bit afraid of her, which was annoying. Bronwyn kept a smile on her face, however, and let them plague her with questions all the way out the city gate. Scout growled softly when the others crowded her too close.

"I don't remember much after I stabbed the Archdemon," she said. "A bright light, and then I suppose I cracked my head. I really know no more than you."

The rest of the commanders were equally inquisitive.



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Benches and light, x-shaped chairs were set up under the open sky, not far from the half-stripped corpse of the Archdemon. Eyes like stilettos raked over Bronwyn from head to toe. She felt oddly glad of her dragon armor, even if it fit uncomfortably without much of her usual padding. She could tell them – and Tara could support the story – of how she had ingested the Ashes of Andraste not so long ago, and how extremely vigorous she had been since them.

For that matter, she felt very well indeed, aside for regretting the loss of good friends and brave comrades. The incessant questions irritated her, tempting her to shout at the fools, wondering what they would do if she simply walked away. She must not lose her temper, but it was difficult. She wished that Riordan were here, but in her heart she acknowledged that he would likely be as puzzled and suspicious as everyone else. Indeed, she herself could not account for her own survival.

Warden scribes took copious notes; Warden artists sketched the scene, hoping to paint splendid pictures to adorn the Warden posts through Thedas. If many of them focused on capturing the likeness of Queen Bronwyn, it was only to be expected. Her huge black dog, the artists felt, added a touch of the exotic, the picturesque, to the composition.

The Wardens' Council declared that Riordan, as soon as he recovered, would be the new Warden-Commander of Orlais. No one questioned it; no rival claimant was proposed. His deeds spoke for themselves.



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"Now that the Blight is over," First Warden Wildauer continued, "it would seem appropriate for Ferelden to have a proper Warden-Commander. You have served admirably as a stopgap, Queen Bronwyn, but perhaps it is time for someone of more experience to step in."

The Fereldans stared at him, holding their collective breath. Bronwyn actually smiled, though it was not a particularly nice smile. She rose to her feet and stared down at the First Warden.

"Someone of more *experience*?" she drawled.

Pentaghost winced, glancing at the looks on the Fereldans' faces. This kind of condescension was hardly the way to begin. Besides, it was not the argument he would have made himself. The queen of Ferelden surely was too busy to also manage the Wardens, and her input should be sought as to a suitable replacement. This? This was not going to end well. In fact, offending her like this meant that all chance of a prolonged, intensive inquiry was at an end. They had been reassured that the Queen Bronwyn was not gestating an Archdemon. It was a time, surely, to celebrate.

"Someone of more *experience*..." Bronwyn repeated. Her gaze hardened, and her voice rose to storm of contempt.

"More *experience* doing *what*?" she exploded. "Perhaps I have little *experience* playing politics in Weisshaupt, but killing darkspawn? Slaying dragons? Exploring the Deep Roads? I challenge you, First Warden, to find any Grey Warden in Thedas who can match my *experience*. Can *you*?"



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An embarrassed silence followed, similar to that at a posh evening party when a guest has emitted a loud fart. The First Warden gaped in surprise at her defiance, and then flushed. Bronwyn was not about to let him answer. Her blood raged in her veins, willing her to strike down this pettifogging bureaucrat.

"Perhaps you think someone has greater *experience* gathering allies or working with fellow Wardens across borders. Do you? I'll match my *experience* to his. Perhaps you think other Wardens have more *experience* piecing together an order with *nothing*: no help from Weisshaupt, no assistance from other Wardens, while dealing with constant assassination attempts, while being dismissed as a mere 'barbarian' by the ignorant fools of Thedas. Do you think I don't know what you think of me? Do you think I didn't know that you wanted me to *fail*? That you wanted me *dead*?"

"When I was conscripted, I heard a great many fine words about the brotherhood of all Wardens: how Wardens fought the darkspawn wherever they found them. What a laugh! Not *one* of you here could trouble himself to come to Ferelden's aid. Not *one* of you cared what happened until Val Royeaux was destroyed! Only one man in all Thedas stood with us. Let me give all honor to my friend, Riordan of Orlais, who came to me in secret, contrary to orders, at the hazard of his life, to help and advise me, to tell me what needed to be done."

"Your Majesty..." Visconti, terribly embarrassed, tried to



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soothe her. "Queen Bronwyn..."

"I'm not *done* yet, Brother Enzo," she said, cheeks as red as her armor, green eyes flashing dangerously. "I'm not done talking about how highly I think of Riordan. He *knew*. He *knew* that what mattered was killing the Archdemon. Not playing sad little political games of power and prestige. Not submitting meekly to a man I'll wager has never confronted a dragon or a Broodmother face to face, sword to claw. Functionaries are all very well in peacetime; but when the darkspawn rise it is *fighting men* who matter."

Anders looked at her in alarm. She was as angry as a dragon herself. Leliana was nervous; remembering all too well the way that Father Kolgrim had sounded: he who drank dragon's blood to make himself bold. Bronwyn had yet more to say.

"How do you think I felt the night the darkspawn destroyed Val Royeaux, the capital of a land that had sent endless assassins against me, that had spun webs to murder my family, that hoped to murder me, that hoped for my country to be raped and ravaged by the darkspawn, that hoped thereby to render Ferelden an empty, nameless wasteland ripe for colonization? I was tempted to let the darkspawn do their worst; I don't deny it.

"But the temptation did not last. Too many innocents would suffer. My enemies were not the merchants and peasants of Orlais, but the proud and powerful; those who thought their actions could never have consequences to themselves. How wrong they were! Further, I knew that if



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I did not fight the darkspawn here, I might very well have to fight them in Ferelden after all; after the Archdemon had swelled its horde to irresistible numbers.

"But finally, I knew that killing the Archdemon was my *duty*. I am a Cousland. I don't know if that means anything to any of you here, but it means something to me. '*A Cousland always does his duty.*' That is my family's motto, and I would never dishonor my blood by cowardly inaction. So I used the crown of Ferelden to build a force large enough to the challenge the horde. I won the dwarves and elves to my banner. The Archdemon lies slain by me, Bronwyn Cousland, Red Queen of Ferelden. If any man wishes to challenge my tenure as Warden-Commander, then here I stand ready to defend my rights."

Wildauer's eyes bugged out. He sputtered, "We can't choose a Warden-Commander by right of combat!"

Sainsby leaned close to Visconti, and muttered. "Sounds like a good system to me."

Pentaghost, who was no coward, spoke into the tension. "Your Majesty, I hold you in all respect. It may be, in time, that your duties as Queen leave little leisure for the needs of the Grey Wardens."

"Well spoken, Brother Hector," Bronwyn replied. "I heard nothing but good of you from my Wardens. That is a reasonable observation, and as such I will heed it. You may well be right. When that day comes, I shall step down, and my appointed successor will assume those duties. Any

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Fereldan Warden can now boast a wealth of experience, and I have complete confidence in them all."

"Perhaps," Elagabalus said, oozing a calming influence on the assembly like oil on troubled waters, "perhaps we should turn our attention to sharing out the Archdemon's relics. There is the blood, and the wing membrane, and the scales and bone..."

Riordan arrived, pale and tired, but hailed by all, and took a seat by Bronwyn. He was rather surprised at the brilliance of her smile and her general air of glowing vitality. It was quite extraordinary, considering how badly they had both been wounded.

They turned to the practical aspects of ending the Blight, not daring to bring up the entire issue of unexpected survivals. The spoils were divided among them, with an occasional wary look at Bronwyn, who lounged gracefully in her seat, as splendid and watchful as a dragon lying in wait.

At noon, the Fereldans and Orlesians gathered to say the words for their dead at the Place Reville. Ordinarily, they would have waited for sunset, but this must be completed today, and the army rested, for Loghain wanted to depart first thing in the morning, and leave the Blight Lands behind.

Dead trees and ruined houses had contributed to the pyres. Wearing only his smallclothes, Duke Prosper was laid on one, already among the nameless dead, for looters had divested him of his magnificent armor, his plumed

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helmet, his wyvern-hide boots, his jewels, and even his silk handkerchiefs.

The Wardens had their own pyre, and Fereldans and Orlesians alike were laid on it. Quinn wept openly, as he laid Niall and Maeve side by side. More tears were shed for other comrades: for Cathair and Sigrun, for Bustrum and Clovis, for Nevin and Oghren and all the rest. They would all be burned here, all alike, whether human, elf, or dwarf, for there was no way to carry them either to a green wood or return them to the Stone in proper fashion. Kegs of wine were rolled out of cellars to see friends and fellow warriors off in style.

There was a stir in the crowd, and a group of Orlesian chevaliers approached, led by Prince Florestan. He carried a long object wrapped in cloth-of-gold. With some trepidation, the Prince bowed to Loghain and Bronwyn.

"Your Majesties," he said, his scarred face grave. "Nothing can express the gratitude of Orlais for your heroism and generous deeds. I wish to present a token of my regard. I pray you accept it. It was never ours, anyway."

He opened the wrappings, and revealed something remarkable.

Bronwyn's eyes lit as she recognized the shape, the symbols, the runes...

Florestan smiled at her, with a nod. "Yes, it is Nemetos, the Sword of Calenhad, taken from King Venedrin of Ferelden in Blessed 8:24. I knew where it was kept in the



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Palace, and thought it a great dishonor to hoard it away from its rightful owner. Let it be a symbol of peace between us." With another bow, he offered the sword to her, hilt first.

Loghain was cynically aware that he was being snubbed, but it was not an effective snub if he did not react to it. What did he care for the ancient sword of the Theirins? Maric had had a fine sword, too, but Loghain had never considered using it.

"The Sword of Calenhad," he declared, giving Bronwyn a little wintry smile. "And very right it is that the blood of Calenhad should wield it."

"A splendid, historic weapon," remarked Bronwyn. "I thank you, your Imperial Highness, for your courtesy."

Yes, a fine weapon, and it would look well hanging on the wall of the Landsmeet. She supposed she must wear it for the time their paths lay together with the Orlesians, but the blade did not sing to her like her Keening Blade. Perhaps this had sung for Calenhad, her ancestor, but he was no more.

That bit of theater complete, it was time to pay tribute to the dead. With her clearest, most ringing tones, Bronwyn led off the speeches before the pyres. Somehow her voice seemed stronger, more resonant. Scout grinned up at her fiercely, proud of his human.

"WE GATHER HERE TO GIVE DUE HONOR TO OUR FRIENDS; TO OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR ALL THE WORLD..."


Bronwyn and Loghain, Florestan and Riordan, each said a few words before the pyres were lit. Perhaps there would



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be a time of harmony between the lands, though the estimate of the duration varied among the four leaders present. Loghain's reckoning, unsurprisingly, was the most pessimistic: perhaps a decade at most. Even that would be something, and would permit Ferelden to grow strong in the interim, without the constant menace on its western border.



As their most reliable friend among the Wardens from the north, Hector Pentaghast saw that the Fereldans received their fair share of the spoils of the Archdemon. Bronwyn did not trust herself to endure another meeting with the First Warden, and he seemed equally glad to avoid her. Kegs of preserved blood and bundles of hide and bone were loaded onto Isabela's ships. A small amount was kept by Bronwyn, for use on the march to Ferelden. An issue niggled at her conscience, and she had decided, if the appropriate moment came, to discuss it with Riordan, at least.

Pentaghast visited the makeshift camp at the Place Reville to coordinate his activities with the Orlesian Wardens. He was remaining here for the foreseeable future, as was Riordan. Both Orlais and Nevarra had the greatest stake in clearing the remains of the horde from the Blight Lands. There were obviously other nests here in the city, and the Wardens would use poison and bombs to prudently destroy them.

"The operative word," Riordan remarked, "being 'prudently.'"

Then too, though no one spoke of it aloud, there was the magnificent loot of Val Royeaux. The city would be



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Tainted probably until the next age, and only Wardens would be able to sift through the rubble in safety.

"We will be expected to pay some percentage to the Empress," said Riordan, "but the Wardens will keep a great deal."

"I promised Sten he could have the Tome of Koslun, if he could find it," Bronwyn reminded them.

"He is welcome to it," said Pentaghast, with a shrug. "It seems fair. The Qunari fight well."

"And eventually," Riordan said, "we will most likely learn that at first hand. For now, however, let them go in peace."

"We Fereldans, however, will leaving tomorrow as early as possible," Bronwyn told them. "We've got too many people in danger of being Tainted. We'll clear out the darkspawn to the Orne as we go. Besides, we've got to get back home eventually. There are still darkspawn in the south and west of Ferelden."

Merrill had told her that the Dalish would travel with the Fereldans. It was a sensible decision. Though the Keepers had ordered their people to be careful, there were those who had contracted the Blight sickness, and no doubt others would show signs, given time. If they did, they would simply Join the Wardens, and continue the journey back to Ferelden.

For there was no use in going anywhere else. The elves were safest with their Fereldan friends. The First Warden had not even troubled himself to speak to them. The Orlesian Wardens had been grateful, but it was unlikely that would



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be the general consensus in the Empire. It was wisest and safest to remain with the army until they reached the Fereldan border, which was now west of Jader. Then the Dalish would go their way: to their new lands in the kingdom.

"Prince Florestan and his chevaliers are leaving as well," Riordan told them. "I urged the Prince to reduce his chance of contracting the Blight sickness. His plan is to go to Val Foret, and then travel around Lake Celestine to Montsimnard to spread the news of the end of the Blight. Then he will ride to the border to escort the Empress — with your permission —" he said to a smiling Bronwyn "— back home."

"There will be no difficulty with that," said Bronwyn. "I promise you."

Her conscience pricked her again. She took a breath, and said, "There's something you need to know, though, before we leave, and you can pass it on to the First Warden and the others. One of our Wardens came up with an improved Joining potion. It is only right that you share in this discovery."

"An improved potion?" Riordan asked. "What does it do?"

"More people survive the Joining, for one thing. We've tried it, and we've had a *lot* fewer deaths. Now's the time to use it, with all the soldiers exposed to the Taint."

The two men glanced at each other, intrigued and hopeful.

"And it may..." Bronwyn hesitated, not sure how much was the potion, and how much Avernus' powerful Blood magic. "...It may prevent the Calling, or delay it. It works on people who have already Joined too, because we all



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took it with no ill effects. I'll have Tara write down the formula for your mages."

"That sounds..." Pentaghast gestured his wonder. "like a brilliant idea." He looked at her keenly. Perhaps this new Joining potion was the answer, at least in part, to the mystery of her survival. He vowed to spread the news immediately to the rest of the Wardens, and did so.

The Antivans, Orlesians, Nevarrans, Rivainnis, and Marchers were quite elated at the news. The Wardens of Weisshaupt and Tevinters did not seem all that impressed. To Riordan and Bronwyn, Pentaghast confided his suspicion that they had already had some such improvement, and had not troubled to inform the rest of the order. First Wardens typically stepped down on their thirtieth year of service, but no one had ever heard of a First Warden going to Orzammar for his Calling. He had assumed that they had another entrance to the Deep Roads further north, but perhaps there was another, more infuriating explanation.

The idea made him feel very unsettled, and then he asked Bronwyn more about the invention of this potion. She asked that he keep what she was about to tell him to himself, then began to recount the adventures of a very old and terrible Warden by the name of Avernus.



At sunset, Sten and his Qunari made a formal leavetaking of Bronwyn and the Wardens, for they were staying in Val Royeaux, of course, to undertake their search for the Tome of Koslun.




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"I certainly hope you find it," Bronwyn told Sten. "You deserve it and more. We say in Fereldan that *'Fortune favors the brave.'*"

Sten allowed himself a faint smile. "or *'the foolish,'* but sometimes it comes to the same thing. I was not certain at first what words to use when describing the sight of you flying on a dragon through the air, but you trusted in your abilities, and your faith was justified. I, too, have faith. I shall find the Tome of Koslun and return it to Par Vollen. My report to the Arishok will be long, and much of it will about you, and the worth of the Wardens."

"And about your discoveries in southern lands," said Bronwyn. "Take this little pamphlet with you. A soldier named Tanna assembled it, and it contains recipes – that is, formulas – for every kind of cookie she knows. Share them with your comrades, and think of our days together!"



Other farewells were made that night. Some were quiet and tender; some were violent and raucous. In the Place Reville, at the Palace, and in the Imperial Market desperate, ferocious looting raged from cellars to garrets. Soldiers begged Wardens to go with them while they pilaged, promising them an extra share to make sure the riches they took were safe. Had it been any place other than Val Royeaux, Loghain would have given strict orders to respect property and keep discipline.

But Loghain lay in Bronwyn's arms that night, and did



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not care what his men did here.

First, she gobbled down a supper sufficient for three men, and then could not wait any longer for him. Her blood was up, and she locked the door to their rooms and tore at his armor as if he were a captured enemy. Loghain was amused, surprised, and rather awed at how fiercely, how swiftly she pounced on him, green eyes aglow in the flickering lamplight. She seemed perfectly healed. Even her bruises were gone. With his effulgent consent, he was pinned to the bed and ravished, wishing that he were twenty years younger for her sake.


In between their love-making, they could hear the noisy celebrations, barely kept in check by the officers.

Bronwyn laughed softly, tracing Loghain's chest with a teasing finger. "There won't be much plunder left for the rest, after our people are done with the place."

"Good," he said, glad not to have to play the diplomat. "They deserve all the plunder their packs can hold. More coin circulating means prosperity at home. Cauthrien and her men found quite a bit of treasure in the Grand Cathedral."

"And that treasure might well pay for our own new Cathedral in Denerim..."

"Nothing more likely," he agreed, pleasantly distracted. "OUR LADY OF THE SACRED ASHES sounds like a good name to me."



Under the next day's red dawn, the King and Queen of Ferelden, followed by their Wardens, nobles, soldiers, dogs,



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and Dalish allies, marched out of Val Royeaux through the Gate of the Sun. Irving and Greagoir, baffled by their own survival, gathered their people and went with them. Going home seemed utterly anticlimactic, but they could think of nothing else to do. Teams of soldiers hauled the ballistae along, their carriages loaded with treasure.

The Dalish Wardens were more downcast than the others. They had searched all over the city for Velanna, and at times they seemed to be on her trail, but the wyvern was cunning and elusive. They would have to leave her to her fate.

Loghain did not look back as the walls of the once-great city shrank into the distance behind them. Val Royeaux was now one with fabled Arlathan: a place where people had lived and were happy, but which was now no more. It would be the preserve of Wardens and plunderers as long as this age lasted, and very likely longer than that.

Bronwyn did look back, and sighed deeply.

"Don't waste your pity on them," Loghain growled.

"Pity? No. I'm ashamed to say I wasn't thinking about the poor slaughtered innocents at all. This adventure is over. *The Blight is over.* Whatever shall we do with the rest of our lives?"

"Live them, I hope," said Loghain. He glanced at her, a ruby flame of hope burning in him that he hardly dared cherish. "We'll build that Cathedral. Give our promised aid to the dwarves. Bring the nobility into line. See justice done in the kingdom. Maybe... have a child... Bring up a Fereldan prince who will always do his duty." He looked away, not wanting

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her to see the desperate longing written on his face.

She was not deceived for a moment. She brushed her shoulder against his, their armor briefly clanking, and smiled at him until he was forced to smile back, just a little. The dogs, happy that their people were happy, capered about, glad at the prospect of a long walk.

Aeron strolled behind them, strumming his lute. He lifted his voice, and Leliana, after a brief, internal struggle, joined in. Other voices were heard, and the tune carried them out of the Blight Lands, under the springtime sun.

*“When duty calls me, I must go
To stand and face another foe
But part of me will always stray
Over the hills and far away.
O'er the hills and o'er the way
We'll live to fight another day.
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.
When evil stalks upon the land
I'll neither hold nor stay my hand,
But fight to win a better day
Over the hills and far away.
O'er the hills and high and low,
Through Jader, Lydes, and Val Royeaux,
The Queen commands and we obey
Over the hills and far away.”*

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EPILOGUE B



DRAGONSEED

ER MAJESTY VISITS
SOLDIER'S PEAK EVERY SPRING,
JUST AFTER THE LANDSMEET.
Everything is going to be perfect

for her, or I'll know the reason why!”

Cook was raging at the kitchenmaids again. That was always entertaining. Brangaine watched from the shadows, hoping the distraction would allow her to snatch away one of the little cakes on the silver tray.

The girl slipped in among the kitchen barrels, praying that the flour dust would not make her sneeze and give her away. Eavesdroppers learned many useful and important things, which was why she had honed this particular skill. Besides, Mother was looking for her, wanting to find fault with something or other. They had been quarrelling all day long. Brangaine would much rather hear about Queen Bronwyn's arrival. Her godmother never forgot to bring her a present, and it was always something wonderful.

The Queen was coming a little earlier than expected this year. She had dealt with the Landsmeet with great



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dispatch, since no one cared to contradict her these days. Uncle Carver had been at the Landsmeet, of course, but had gone ahead of the Queen to alert the castle to her arrival. She had other visits to make before coming here.

There was noise upstairs, and Brangaine heard Mother calling for her. She slid back further into the shadows, determined not to answer. Today's lessons had not gone well, not because Brangaine could not do the spells, but because she hated the way Mother always spoke to her.

If she must have lessons – even though she was a tall girl just turned fourteen – she had much rather have them with Father, who always made a game of it, and whose face crinkled up so nicely when he laughed. Mother laughed, all right, but it was always a bad sign. Mother had a rather ugly laugh. Mother laughed when she thought people were being stupid, or when something horrible happened to someone. It had taken some time for the idea to sink in, but Brangaine had now concluded that Mother was a very cruel person.

And when Father was busy teaching the acolytes, Brangaine would much rather go up to the dragon caves and learn from Ostop and Brosca. They would let her help feed the dragonlings and watch while they trained the new teams. The five-year-olds were big enough now to be taken out for aerial training with their Warden partners. How beautiful they were in flight, and how they called to something in Brangaine that she could not yet find words to express.



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Mother said it was a second-rate manner of flying, riding on a creature's back, and that when she deemed Brangaine mature enough, she would teach her a proper shape herself. So far, it was always "not yet."

Brangaine grinned fiercely at the bustling kitchen help, her eye on marzipan cakes exquisitely decorated with spun sugar flowers. If she tried hard enough, she would be out of the shadows, snatch up a treat, and be hidden before any of the silly mundanes could take note of her.

She was magical – very magical – as both Father and Mother agreed. There were mages, and then there were mundanes, but no mage or mundane was exactly the same as every other.

Some mundanes feared magic, which was why Brangaine's family lived at Soldier's Peak now, instead of at the Warden Compound at the Palace in Denerim. More mages were out in public now, due to Queen Bronwyn's wise reforms, but most people, when confronted with a magical child, still thought she belonged at the Circle of Magi, where her magic could be controlled and trained.

Some mundanes had quasi-magical powers themselves, and the line between magical and non-magical was often blurred. Queen Bronwyn herself, after all...

Brangaine narrowed her eyes, gathered her mana, and gave the silly maid Nerila a *push*, using her magic. If she prepared carefully... it worked, this time! The maid paused, mouth open, looking dazed. In a flash Brangaine



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was out from cover, and the lovely little cake was captured and carried off to be savored at her leisure. It was dainty and perfect: its delicate glaze perfectly white, but for the exquisite rose at the top.

It was such fun to steal like this, though it was just as easy – and rather safer – just to look in the servitors' eyes and tell them to give her what she wanted. They were so simple, for the most part, and most of them were intimidated by a mage child. If she asked in the right way, they would probably give her the keys to the spice closet and the treasury. Better not to risk it, though... not yet, anyway. Mother was clever at knowing when Brangaine was up to something.

She would tell her so, too, in that old-fashioned, affected, *horrid* way that Brangaine hated more and more, day by day. And then she would *smile* – that nasty, mocking smile – as she said it:

"So, Child... do you think I do not know that you are doing mischief? I know what you have done, even before you do it. 'Tis the Mother's Gift."

There were days when Brangaine thought she had had just about enough of Mother.

And then, too, sometimes she did not need magic at all. In the past year or so, boys – and sometimes even grown men – went all silly over her. They would stare, foolish grins on their foolish faces, and gape as she passed. One servant boy had left flowers in front of her door until Mother caught him at it. She screamed at him and chased



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him down the hall. When he tried it again, she switched him for it, the little willow branch whipping in a storm of hissing blows, scratching his face bloody. Then he was sent away, which Brangaine thought a great pity, since she was quite fond of flowers.

Mother had called the boy's floral tributes 'trash' and thrown them out the window. Mother only liked beautiful things if they were also costly, and made of gold and jewels. Brangaine was beginning to wonder if Mother had a soul.

If Brangaine could manage to control her magic well enough, the Queen had promised she should come to Denerim and spend some time at Court. She could study ancient languages and lore with Aunt Tara and healing with Uncle Jowan and Aunt Bethany. Not to mention the thrilling life lessons to be gleaned from Uncle Zevran!

She felt very much in command of her magic now. The mages here fussed and coddled her, giving her dire warnings about the temptations of demons in the Fade. Brangaine really had no idea what they were talking about. The Fade was lovely, and Brangaine felt utterly secure there. Now and then she awakened, believing that she must have been dreaming of lovely voices singing in the distance: two perfect voices in harmony. Sometimes, in her dreams, she joined in, improvising an ecstatic descant octaves above them. Nothing could harm her in the Fade. It was the day-to-day world that was the challenge.

The Queen was a great believer in the virtues of chil-

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dren spending some time in fostering, to learn new ways and to keep noble – or powerful – children from being spoiled. Mother did not like the idea of anyone having control of Brangaine but herself, but even Mother would not be able to defy the Queen of Dragons.

Brangaine had saved the spun sugar rose for last, as it was almost too pretty to eat. Almost. It was made of sugar and was therefore ephemeral. Keeping it past its prime would cause it to rot and decay and lose all its transitory beauty. Aunt Leliana had taught her a song about that very thing: that sometimes brief things were more beautiful because they *were* ephemeral, like her little edible rose. It might be fun to learn to make them, but she liked her lessons in music and dancing better, if only because they vexed Mother so much. That would be another advantage in going to Denerim. Aunt Leliana was there, and Brangaine could learn from her again. Leliana had told her she was exceptionally gifted and that her voice would be exquisite when it fully matured. The Queen would agree to it, because she was fond of music herself.

Brangaine also loved pictures and statues, and there were few enough of them here, in the Maker-forsaken Coast mountains. Soldier's Peak was not exactly full of fine art. There was a conventionally dull statue of Andraste – though Brangaine liked the way it was made so flames rose from her uplifted hand, fed by a vessel of oil. There was an old statue of Korth the Mountain Father out in the garden,

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which had a certain rough-hewn sincerity. Sometimes she joined Ostap when he prayed to him, though she liked the Lady of the Skies better. There was the ugly, fly-specked painting of Commander Asturian, so dark and dingy you could hardly make out his face. Of course there was a vivid portrait of the Queen in her dragon armor, looking amused. Brangaine said hello to it every day. Aside from a few crude still-lives and seascapes, that was all there was to feed a ravenous, ever-increasing hunger for beauty. If she went to Denerim, perhaps she could have drawing lessons with the Queen's court painter, Messere Donati.

There was so much to see, so much to *do* in Denerim, and even it, everyone knew, was hardly the greatest city in Thedas. Rumor was that Jader was easily its equal, even after the building of the new Cathedral in Denerim, and the improvements to the Palace and the Market District. Brangaine wanted to see the Cathedral. She had heard that the stained-glass windows were a wonder. There was a round one in the front, called a 'rose window' that was made with every color in the rainbow...

Brangaine wondered if the Queen would bring her a new gown, or perhaps some jewelry. Perhaps a lute of her own! That was an exciting thought. If the Queen gave it to her, Mother would not dare to take it away. Of course, if she *did* go to Denerim, the Queen would give her new garments anyway, since she would not want a fosterling going about in hideous rags of homespun and goathide.

She would certainly not miss any of the other children here. Silly creatures, all of them, except for Rica. Rica understood the dragons even better than her parents. She could practically talk to them, even without any dragon blood to help her along. It was nice that Rica had a useful ability, considering how awfully homely she was. Avvar and dwarf was not a combination tending toward good looks. Brangaine preened a little, admiring the lock of silky black hair hanging down over her shoulder and her long-fingered white hands. Noticing that they were sticky, she hastily licked the last of the sugary crumbs from them and wiped them on her skirt.

Someone was coming. Brangaine knew Mother's impatient footsteps all too well. Mother could not follow her quite as well nowadays, since Brangaine had learned the secret of the little ring of of dragonthorn wood that Mother had made her wear. Mother would simply have to make another, if she wished to track Brangaine like her forest prey. It had been no end of effort and work, but Brangaine had taken off the ring and stared at it, wishing *hard*, until it was just a little bit smaller — too small for even Mother to force on her finger.

Of course, if Mother grew exasperated, she might shapeshift into a wolf and sniff her out. That was horrible and degrading, especially when she captured Brangaine's wrist in her yellow fangs and dragged her along. She had done it more than once, and heartless people had seen

it, and laughed and laughed. Brangaine gritted her teeth, hot with remembered outrage. Someday, she would have her revenge on them all.

"Morrigan!" called a voice, and Brangaine relaxed a little, smiling. She liked Uncle Carver. He was handsome, and not a bit afraid of her. And she knew he thought she was pretty. She had heard him say so to Leliana once.

"Brangaine's going to be a raving beauty. She's already the prettiest girl at Soldier's Peak!"

Brangaine smiled again, basking in the compliment.

"What now?" Mother asked, clicking her tongue with impatience.

Carver was not afraid of Mother, either. He was quick with his big sword, and knew all the Templar tricks.

"The Queen's party has been seen on the road. We need to assemble on the steps to greet her. Could you go fetch Anders and the others from the Mages' Tower?"

"I cannot find Brangaine. The wretched brat has run away again."

Carver laughed. "I'm sure she'll be there to see the Queen. She generally knows what's going on."

Mother huffed, but did as he asked. Brangaine smiled, spitefully pleased. Others might wonder why Mother put up with other people at all, but Brangaine had discovered that the Wardens had their limits. Mother was not a Warden herself, and there had been a time that she quarrelled horribly and constantly with the other inhabitants

of the Peak. The Queen tolerated her for old time's sake. Brangaine, hiding in a cupboard, had overheard a certain private conversation. The Queen told Mother that the price of her life of comfort and security and doing whatever she liked when she liked was that she must not insult Father's brother and sister Wardens ever again. Now, instead, Mother made do with insulting Father and Brangaine. She really was quite awful.

I wonder if it's because she's jealous?

Brangaine slipped out of her hiding place and dashed down to the laundry to wash her face and hands, turning this new, interesting idea over in her mind, rubbing mental fingers over it like a smooth bit of marble.

Brangaine looked into the sliver of mirror over the wash basin, wiped away a smudge of sugar on her nose, and admired the reflection. Yes, she was the most beautiful of them all — girl or woman, man or boy — at Soldier's Peak. Mother had once been a great beauty — and Father still pretended she was — but Brangaine was quick to notice the spreading lines at her mother's eyes and brow and the deep creases of bad temper and dissatisfaction at her mouth. Her figure was still slim, but sagged in places where it had once been — what was the word Ketil had used? Yes... where it had once been... perky.

I'm prettier than Mother already, Brangaine realized, with a swell of delight. In a year or two, no one will look at her anymore, when they can look at me instead. Soon everybody

will want to look at me. They'll come from everywhere to look at me, and if I'm not here, they'll go home disappointed.

And she was much nicer than Mother. She had learned manners from watching the Queen and her noble friends. She could speak courteously to people, and thank them properly when they were kind and generous, whereas Mother's tongue stumbled over any attempt to express gratitude.

I'm more interesting than Mother, too. All Mother can do is magic... and she can't even heal! I can do magic and I can play the lute and sing beautifully and embroider better than anyone I know and dance every court dance and tend flowers so they bloom in glory and I've read all the books in the library except for the locked-up ones. And I know Arcanum and Tevene and Orlesian.

But even that was not the heart of the matter.

The last straw for Mother must be that I'm more magically talented than she is. No wonder she won't teach me to shape-shift. She knows I'll be stronger than she is soon, and then she can whistle if she thinks she's going to tell me what to do! She's trying to hold me back.

It must be true. There was a Warden whom Mother had not wanted Brangaine to meet: the terrible old man who never left his rooms in the Mages' Tower; the one that the Queen always paid a courtesy call on every year. Of course, Brangaine had made a point of sneaking in and seeing him anyway. Brosca had taught her how to pick locks ages ago. She did not try to see him often, but when she did,

she always learned something new and memorable.

Avernus had found her very interesting. He had sat her down opposite him and asked her all sorts of questions. He had even asked for the date of her birth and had puzzled over it for some time. He had tested her magic and even pricked her finger for her blood. Looking back on it, Brangaine was a little uneasy about allowing that, but Avernus had insisted on the test, and then told her that she was going to be –

“Extraordinary.”

He had quite the creepy smile, but they had agreed between them that Mother was not to know that they were friends. It was quite impossible to give him a *push*, and it only made him grin like a skull. He was one of those people, like Mother or the Queen, that Brangaine could not make do as she liked. In his case, it made her like him, as someone who enjoyed her company without being magicked into it. Warden Avernus knew absolutely heaps of magic – even magic that was beyond his own power. He approved of Brangaine’s interest in music and art, and told her how important it was to discover one’s own talents. If she did not wish to be a Grey Warden – and he agreed that it would be a disaster for her – then it was best that she stake out her own destiny and do things that no one had done before.

“The world can never have too much Beauty,” he told her. It confirmed her opinion that Avernus was a very wise man. Brangaine knew in her heart that that was a great

truth. If she could, she would make everything ugly and tiresome into something beautiful and interesting. Either that, or erase it altogether.

She fingered her ugly, shapeless, too-short gown of unbleached linen with distaste, wishing she had something worthy to wear to celebrate the Queen’s visit. She had been growing out of her clothes at a great rate lately, and nothing she had worn last summer fit her anymore. This horror had belonged to one of the castle maids. Mother was useless with a needle. Brangaine would have to make something herself, once she wheedled worthwhile linen from the housekeeper. It was too bad the Queen would have to look at such an eyesore.

On the other hand, she mused, if Queen Bronwyn sees me in this, she’s likely to be sorry for me and give me something nice.

Bronwyn Cousland, the Red Queen of Ferelden, the Dragonslayer, the Hero of Ostagar, Andraste’s True Champion, the Victor of the Fifth Blight, was still a beautiful young woman.

Brangaine looked upon her, as she always did, with great pleasure. The Queen was only thirty-four, after all; in her prime and likely to stay there for quite some time. Vitality in her was brimful, like a glittering lamp. She glowed among her retinue like a ruby set in steel. At the moment, the Queen was not in armor, but in a gorgeous crimson riding gown that one longed to touch. Brangaine felt she could never be tired of admiring her. She

had always felt connected to the Queen somehow, as if she were her real mother, or the mother she should have had.

The Queen had brought a very large retinue with her this time; much larger than last year's: her maids, her children's maids, and her young private secretary, Mistress Demelza. Though she was disappointed not to see Aunt Leliana, Brangaine's cheeks flushed hot with satisfaction at the sight of the royal children, every one of them healthy and blazing with great good looks. She had not seen them in years, not since she made that awkward slip with her magic that banished her to Soldier's Peak.

She remembered Crown Prince Gareth best, of course. They were nearly of an age, and had played together when they were little. There was little resemblance between that pretty little boy and the lad on the cusp of splendid manhood before her. He was already tall and broad-shouldered, though still a beardless youth. His hair was black as her own, and shone like a raven's wing. Turning a little, he glanced her way, looked startled, and gave her a bit of smile. Yes! She had almost forgotten the dimples! Brangaine smiled back. What eyes he had! Like bits of blue mountain ice under strong dark brows. It was a finely modeled face, she knew, remembering what she had learned of sculpture. Good cheekbones, strong jaw, handsome mouth. His nose was high-bridged, but Brangaine thought that made him look more aristocratic. He was a lovely lad, taken altogether. Of course, everyone

always said that about princes, but Gareth really looked as princes were supposed to, and very rarely did. A young mabari trotted up the stairs after him, alert and prideful.

Prince Cormac was twelve, and Brangaine remembered him, too. A slender, handsome youth, said to be something of a scholar already. No one was quite sure what to make a scholar prince, but Brangaine was alive to the beauty of books and learning herself, and was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. People discreetly remarked that he looked more like his father than any of the other children. He sat his horse in perfect ease, and had a mabari puppy following him about. By that standard alone, he was a true Fereldan. Brangaine had heard that the party would next stop at Highever, where they were to visit the Teyrna's university. At least a scholar prince would have a proper place to study and clever companions to learn beside. Brangaine remembered that girls were permitted there too, and briefly pictured herself among other young robed scholars. Interesting...

Sliding off their horses amidst giggles and teasing were the princesses, both ten years old. Twins were held to be very unlucky, especially in situations where succession order mattered, but the Queen bore them anyway and had not permitted a well-meaning midwife to put an end to the weaker one. Twins were supposed to look exactly alike, but Princess Eleanor and Princess Maude did not. Both had the same chestnut-brown hair as the Queen, but Eleanor



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had Gareth's bright blue eyes, while Maude's were a stormy grey. Maude was a bit taller, too, and a great deal more lively. Nonetheless, they were both very pretty, and their clothes were were a delight and a marvel, with Eleanor in cornflower-blue and Maude in a wonderful leaf-green.

There was another girl with them, about Cormac's age: an ethereal young girl in opulent garments who reminded Brangaine of a white mouse. She had plaits of the palest golden hair held back from her face by a sapphire clasp, very white, blue-veined skin, and eyes of aquamarine. A groom helped her down from her horse, addressing her as "Lady Moira." Brangaine made a face at the sight of a girl that age, unable to dismount on her own, and decided that she was a fool. The two princesses dashed up on either side of her, and linked arms with her, pulling her along, as if she were their pet.

In the Queen's retinue were the Teyrn and Teyrna of Highever, with their own children, and quite the mob they were, even after leaving the two youngest at home. Brangaine did not remember them well, but she knew her heraldry, and besides, who else would be joking with the Queen like that? The Teyrn did not much resemble his sister, since he looked like a big scruffy, hugable bear. Silver threaded in his hair and beard, but his smile was like the sun. Brangaine had always heard good things about Teyrn Fergus. Even Mother approved of him. He noticed Brangaine, and turned to his wife, saying, "There's a pretty little girl."



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Teyrna Anora, Dowager-Queen of Ferelden, who gave Brangaine a nice smile, was also worth a look. She was a very attractive woman, though years of child-bearing had thickened her figure. Her hair was still a rich dark gold, and arranged in elaborate plaits that were as splendid as her jewelry. Brangaine studied the arrangement carefully, hoping to use some of the elements herself.

Less easy to remember were the names of the horde of young lords and ladies trooping after their parents. She could only remember the eldest two: Bryce and Caradoc, both tall, sturdy boys. The two girls, one blonde and one brunette, and the younger, dark-haired boy were quite unknown to her. She would have to eavesdrop on the servants if she were not to appear ignorant. With their party was a grey-haired Nevarran woman who was supposedly the famous minstrel Zoe Pheronis. Surely she would perform at the feast! With her, carrying her instrument cases, was a well-dressed young elf girl. Probably her apprentice. Brangaine admired her bright garments with a surge of envy. Apprenticing to a minstrel would be fairly good fun.

With the Queen, of course, was her elven bodyguard, Ser Zevran Aranai. Brangaine beamed at the sight of him, exquisite, perfectly groomed, and deadly as the blades he carried. Some people still stared when he was introduced, Brangaine was told, but the scandal of the Queen knighting elves and surface dwarves in the wake of the Blight had died a natural death over the years. Ser Zevran was also her Uncle Zevran,

as he was the husband of her clever Aunt Tara. Who, alas, was not here, but back at the Warden Compound with their little girl. Aunt Tara and Father and Mother had once been friends, but apparently the Blight had killed that. Now they avoided each other whenever possible.

Everyone made their reverence to the Queen and the royal children, and Uncle Carver made some sort of speech of welcome. He looked genuinely glad to see the Queen, which was proper and pleasing. The Queen seemed pleased, too, happy to see everyone, speaking to some of them as she swept up the steps and into the Keep. Brangaine edged as close as she dared, listening to the talk.

They had been friends and playmates, so Brangaine saw no harm in having a word with Gareth before tonight's feast. The princes and princesses were being lodged in a suite of grand rooms above the great hall, and it was a simple matter to weave in and out among the bustling servants.

To her delight, Gareth recognized her at once. He gave her a smile and waved her into the sitting room. The dogs sniffed at her, and retreated to the other side of the room. The bigger one growled a little.

"Stop that, Rambler! It's Brangaine, isn't it? Warden Anders' daughter? Maker, it's been years, and now we're almost grown up! Cormac, do you remember Brangaine?"

"Of course I do," replied the younger boy, politely setting his book aside and rising to speak to her, as a gentleman should. "You made me play the part of the darkspawn."

They all laughed at that, and Brangaine remembered it well: poor little Cormac made to go "Arghhhh!" while they smote him with pretend spells and swords...

One of the servants brought in a tray of cider and snacks to hold them until dinner, and Gareth invited Brangaine to join them. She plumped herself down on a low stool by the table, admiring the finger sandwiches. Cook never made those for Wardens, who after all would not have found the whole tray more than a mouthful.

"These are gorgeous," she remarked. "Smoked salmon!"

"They *are* nice," Gareth agreed. He raised his voice, shouting through one of the doors. "Hurry up, you girls! We'll eat the lot before you're done primping!"

The girls hurried out, laughing, pulling each other's plaits.

"Oh! Look at the lovely cakes!" cried Eleanor, reaching for one.

The white mouse-girl stared at Brangaine, a look of bewildered disgust on her face. Not deigning to speak to Brangaine directly, she turned to Gareth.

"What is that... that... *girl* doing here? Why are you letting her steal food?" To her maid, she said, "Odette, tell the churl to go away and fetch more water for my bath."

Before the maid could transmit the message, Brangaine jumped to her feet, fists clenched, cheeks flaming.

"Fetch it yourself! I'm not a servant!"

Odette, the maid, tutted in a scandalized way. The white mouse was livid was shock.

"How dare you speak to me like that! I'll have you

whipped and turned off for insolence!"

"I'd like to see you try!"

"Stop yelling, both of you!" yelled Gareth. "We invited her, Moira. She's a friend."

"A strange sort of friend!" Moira sneered daintily. "She looks like a beggarmaid in those rags!"

Knowing it was only too horribly true, Brangaine hissed in baffled rage. She wanted to hurt the white mouse: she wanted her to crush her and burn her with magic. She wanted to give the white mouse a *push*, and make her hit her head against the wall. If she did, Queen Bronwyn would never take her to Denerim. Gareth laid a hand on her arm. The dogs, confused, ran about the room, adding to the noise.

"She's very pretty, though," Maude said. "I like her hair."

"She's pretty enough to be a maid in the royal apartments," Eleanor agreed generously.

"Brangaine is a Warden's child," Gareth told Moira and his sisters. "We used to play together in the Palace."

"I daresay she wore that exact dress," Moira sniffed. "It looks shabby enough!"

"Ooo!" cried Maude, delighted at the scene. "Fighting words! A fight! A fight!"

"Maude, really!" her sister reproved her. "Not a fight." Her eyes lit with mischief. "A proper *duel*."

"Don't!" cried the white mouse. "Don't be so hateful. I don't know how to fight! *Maman* forbids it!"

Brangaine looked her rival up and down. She had seen

enough fighting to know how to go about it. For this, she would not even need magic.

"Too bad," she said. "Maybe after I thrash you, you'll know you have to take responsibility for your words."

"I'll tell the Queen! I am her goddaughter!"

"So am I!"

"Liar! You're a lying, raggedy peasant! An ugly, dirty *chur!*!"

They glared at each other, poised for battle, fingers ready to scratch, instinctive enemies. Brangaine knew, in a flash of insight, that they would always, always, be at odds, and perhaps over greater matters than a few spiteful insults.

The princesses squealed with laughter. The dogs barked, jumping and fidgeting. Gareth was backing away, disconcerted by all the fiery girlish emotions on view. He glanced at Cormac for support, but his younger brother had taken up his book again, and was pretending to be oblivious of his surroundings.

"Don't look at me," he muttered. "She's not *my* betrothed. Too bad Fiona wasn't the eldest."

The maid wrung her hands, unsure what to do. Very likely things would have deteriorated even more. But the door had opened a few moments before, and the quarrel was overheard by someone with the will to act.

"That's enough!" Queen Bronwyn rapped out, stepping in between the girls. She looked angry. A hush fell. Even the dogs crept away, tails between their legs. Bronwyn gave the useless maid a look that sent her scurrying back to the

girls' bedchamber. That done, she spoke to the children.

"Moira: Soldier's Keep is the home of the Wardens, and thus Brangaine's home. Thus, you are a *guest* in her home. I never want to hear you use the word 'churl' again. We'll talk later about this." She turned to her crestfallen daughters. "You are guests, too. Not very nice ones at the moment. Unpleasant quarrels are not something to egg on for your own amusement." She glanced briefly at her sons with a hint of disappointment, and then lifted Brangaine's chin up to her with a gentle hand. She smiled. "Growing again, I see. Let's find you something for the feast tonight. I'm sure Mistress Korvath has something in the stores."

They walked downstairs together, the Queen's arm around her. People drew back and bowed to them. Brangaine's heart quickened again, not with anger and shame, but with delighted pride and affection. This was lovely. This how it *should* be between a mother and a daughter.

"Is that girl Moira really going to marry Gareth?" she asked softly.

"That's the plan," Bronwyn said. "Lady Moira Fitzmaric is the granddaughter of King Maric. The royal lines will be united by the marriage. I'm going to foster Moira for a few years so she can learn our ways, and how to play the part of a Fereldan princess."

Brangaine had just enough sense not to remark that was rather hard on Gareth to unite the royal lines by mar-

rying a stuck-up white mouse. The Queen smiled, seeming to guess what Brangaine was thinking.

"Princes and princesses don't have your freedom, Brangaine. Plans are in the works for Cormac to be betrothed next year to the Arl of West Hills' daughter. Maude will almost certainly marry Lord Padrig Howe, and Eleanor..." she sighed. "Eleanor might have to travel even farther away. The King of Nevarra has asked for an alliance."

"They're not being fostered?"

"Oh, they've visited often at Highever over the years, just as their cousins come and stay with me now and then. Actually, Cormac will be spending quite a bit of this year down in the south, visiting his teyrnir of Gwaren and learning the business of ruling from Arl Corbus Bryland. Gareth is going to Val Orne this summer, to polish his manners at the Orlesian Court. As for the girls, when they turn thirteen... or perhaps fourteen... they will be fostered by the families of their future husbands."

They were soon down in the storage rooms, and one of the female clerks was coming forward, anxiously eager to serve the Queen.

"We need something festive for my goddaughter Brangaine."

Embarrassed, the clerk checked the records and blurted out that Brangaine, daughter of Warden Anders, was not due her clothing allotment until Summerday. The Queen was not to be inconvenienced by that in the least.

"Oh, this isn't the allotment. This is something extra. I'll

repay the Wardens out of the Privy Purse. We need a festive gown for tonight and something better for day wear, too. She's a long child, but not yet a woman. Let's start looking, shall we?"

They found wonderful things: new boots that actually fit; a green linen gown for everyday, to be girdled by a dark green belt embroidered with a pattern of wild roses.

"I'll embroider roses at the neck and wrists of the gown," said Brangaine. "I've learned to embroider really quickly and well."

"Have you?" Bronwyn asked, surprised. "That's very... lady-like of you. I was never very skilled with a needle myself."

"Look!" said Brangaine. "I did this!" She pulled out a pocket handkerchief that she had covered with a profusion of flowers. Andraste's Grace and embrium ran riot in satin stitches, with their golden hearts executed in neat, uniform Orlesian knots.

"That's very fine work," Bronwyn told her. She smiled oddly. "Very fine indeed. It reminds me of my mother. She embroidered beautifully."

"I made a handkerchief just like it for you," Brangaine told her proudly, "but with red roses. It's up in my room. I'll give it to you before you leave."

"That would be lovely. I have never seen better work."

The dress for the feast was even more wonderful: silk in an unusual, rich shade of lavender, trimmed at the shoulders with a shiny leather that was a little darker in color. The belt was wide, though not a corset, and was decorated

with three rows of amethyst studs. It was of the same puce leather as the trim.

Bronwyn ran the belt through her fingers. "Dragonhide. From a dragonling, by the fine texture. Not all of them live, poor things."

"This is a costly garment, Your Majesty," the clerk dutifully noted, as she helped pin it in a few places. "It was made for the wedding of young Warden Selwyn, but was returned to storage, since she died before it could ever be worn."

"Oh, I think I can somehow afford it," Bronwyn said, her tone sharpening. She had little patience with fools, even when they were doing their duty. To Brangaine she said, "With your gold locket and earrings, you'll be quite the fine lady."

"I hope Mother lets me wear them," Brangaine said gloomily. "She has all my jewelry locked up in her room until she thinks I'm *mature* enough to be trusted with it."

"I'll talk to her," said the Queen. "Surely for one night she need not be so cautious."

The green dress would be delivered to her room later. Brangaine begged to be allowed to keep her finery on, since they would be summoned to the feast very soon.

"Of course. Let's find your mother."

Back up the steps they went, up and up, the cynosure of all eyes. Brangaine strode proudly, head held high, no longer looking so unworthy to be a Queen's goddaughter. Indeed, some people might take them for mother and daughter by blood. At least she was not as silly as those pretty fools, Elea-



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nor and Maude, and their horrid pet white mouse.

Uncle Carver stepped out of his quarters and wanted a word, and the Queen had Brangaine wait for her by the door. The Queen and the Warden-Commander looked serious, so Brangaine edged closer, wanting to hear what they said, even if she didn't understand it.

"You received my report about the elves, I hope," he said, his voice low.

"Of course. It's hardly surprising that so many have gone to the new homeland, even with the improvements I've made to the Denerim and Gwaren Alienages. I understand there's quite the charming village in the homeland now. You must have heard the talk at the Landsmeet yourself. I'd hoped to be invited for a visit, but they prefer to keep to themselves, which is hardly surprising. For Grey Wardens to desert... Perhaps it's not desertion, exactly. Perhaps they're merely scouting the elven homeland. I suggest you send a formal query to Keeper Marethari."

"I did." Uncle Carver looked grim. "I was told they were no longer there. The problem is, I see no way they could be anywhere else. I wrote to Tara about this, too, hoping she had some other sources. She wrote back, and said that Marethari wasn't a liar. I get the feeling that there's something going on; something big, but no elves will talk. Has Zevran said anything to you?"

The Queen bit her lip, hesitating. *"I... may... have been told things in confidence. You cannot repeat this to anyone.*



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The fact is that many elves have made the decision to leave Thedas altogether."

Brangaine's eyes widened. This was fascinating. It explained the gradual disappearance of all the elven servants at Soldier's Peak over the past few years.

"Leaving?" Carver rubbed his brow. "Adaia and her ships, of course. I haven't heard from Fenris in over a year. You don't know where they're going?"

Bronwyn hesitated again, and said, *"No. They're going to a place where humans will not enslave them, or exploit them, or even condescend to them. I understand, of course. If I were an elf, I'd gladly kill every human in Thedas, starting with the Tevinters. That does not, however, mean that I'm happy when Grey Wardens forswear their oaths."*

"You've been pretty lenient with Adaia."

"I have my reasons. Having a force to thwart Tevinter and Qunari incursions at sea is useful in itself. Besides, she became a Grey Warden because a human nobleman behaved in an unspeakable way to her, and the man was beyond the law. Why should the elves trust us, in the end? I can only answer for my own honor. I cannot answer for how my grandchildren may keep my promises."

"You don't think the elven homeland will last forever, then."

"My dear Carver," she said, with a bitter smile. "I know better than anyone that nothing lasts forever." She shrugged. "Keep Darach and the rest on the rolls. They may come back. One never knows. But do not pursue the matter."



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She gave him a nod as they parted, and then smiled at Brangaine, gesturing at her to join her.

"I've written to your father about you spending a little time in Denerim. He thinks it would be good for you. It's always important to broaden one's education."

"Would you really take me with you?" Brangaine knew that usually, whatever Father said, it was Mother who would make the decision. But this was different. Surely Mother would have to obey the Queen. Brangaine's spirits danced at the prospect.

The Queen smiled. "Yes, why not? A few months in a new place would be quite educational, don't you think?" The smile faded. "I can't tell you how much I regret being sequestered at Highever when I was young. I quarreled with my parents when I was about fifteen, and they never took me to the Landsmeet again. I stayed at home for years and years, brooding over my imagined wrongs, holding close to unhealthy obsessions. Seeing more of the world would likely have set me straight. And you, my dear, don't have a mabari to keep you company." She squeezed Brangaine's shoulder, smiling ruefully. "How I miss my poor old Scout."

"I'm no good with most animals," Brangaine confessed. "Dogs and horses don't like me. I get on with the dragonlings all right, though. Ostap says he'll take me up on Melikar soon."

"That sounds like great fun. You must help show me about the caverns before we go. I'm thinking about establishing some of our friends on Dragon's Peak. The name sounds like destiny to me."



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"To me, too!"

They stepped out onto the slender walkway connecting the main Keep with the Mages' Tower. The wind was sharp there, the spring air nipping at them, pulling at their hair. Far below, the footmen and grooms unloaded wagons and carriages and walked out the horses.

"Denerim quiets down considerably after the Landsmeet," said the Queen. "A great many of the nobles go to their lands for the growing season. Some come back to town in the winter if they don't care much for hunting. The only time the city is really crowded is for the Landsmeet... well, beginning two months before – while everyone is getting a new wardrobe – and for a few days after. We have a lot of weddings then, so more people can attend. I'm afraid you'll find Denerim rather dull at the moment."

"Oh, no! I can't wait!" Brangaine told her, her heart pounding at the glory of it. "I need to get away. No one here understands me." She glared at the figure emerging from the tower. "Especially her."

Morrigan stalked toward them, glaring back at her daughter. She had been a horrible mood all day, and was clearly spoiling for a fight.

"I have been looking everywhere for you. Where have you been? And why are you dressed as if for a pantomime? Go to your room and change at once!"

"Hello to you, too, Morrigan," the Queen said coldly, clearly displeased at this rudeness. "The gown is a gift from me to

my goddaughter. It should do nicely for tonight's feast."

"She will dirty it. I trust it did not come out of our allotment?"

"It is a *gift*," the Queen repeated, her voice sharpening. "And if she dirties it I shall give her *another!* We were just off to get her jewelry."

"So she can be fine for your grand event? She is already vain enough!"

Brangaine blushed at the sneer. Yes, she wanted to be fine. She wanted Gareth to see how much prettier she was than the white mouse. The Queen, Andraste bless her, backed her up.

"I seem to recall that her mother is not averse to wearing jewelry, either."

"As you wish. If she loses her trinkets from carelessness, she had best not come crying to me!"

Brangaine wondered what would happen to an ordinary commoner who spoke to the Queen in such a way. She was ashamed of her mother's bad temper and bad manners. It was an ugly scene, and Brangaine hated ugly scenes. Clearly, the Queen did, too, and she flushed with anger.

"In my opinion, Brangaine would benefit by some time away from home. When I leave, I shall take her along with me for a visit to Denerim —"

Mother went white. "You would not dare! You would take my child... my *only* child from me..."

"For a *visit*, Morrigan! It's plain that the two of you are at odds. A holiday for Brangaine would allow a breathing space for both of you and a chance to adjust to the fact

that she is *growing up*."

"And you think yourself better able to raise my child?" Brangaine had never seen her mother so furious. "Better than her own mother? You would take her away from her father? Is this a piece of spite because your own children no longer have a father of their own?"

Brangaine blinked. Mother must be really angry if she brought up Father, because she generally behaved as if Father was of no importance at all. She had even tried to take Brangaine with her and run away from Father. Twice. Brangaine had screamed too loudly the first time for her to make a clean escape. The second time, Brangaine had simply refused to go. Mother could have gone if she had left Brangaine behind, but she would not do that.

The Queen was holding firm, unimpressed by Mother's scolding tongue. "Anders agrees that a change of scene would do Brangaine good."

That stopped Mother for just a moment, and then she was even angrier.

"You went to Anders," she fumed, "*behind my back*, and talked him into this! You would have done better to be so persuasive with Loghain!" Her eyes narrowed in malice, "It is not I," she drawled, "whose husband left me for *another man*."

A silence, while the Queen's green eyes flashed. Brangaine held her breath. *No one* ever mentioned King Loghain. No one, because everyone knew how he had left the Queen and his children to look for King Maric, who was rumored

to be alive and a prisoner somewhere in the north. He broke the Queen's heart doing it, as all the world knew, and he had not been heard of since. Mother had really gone too far this time. Perhaps Mother knew it too, for she stepped back a pace, and her smirk faded. The Queen simply stared at her.

"And you know what I told him then," Bronwyn said, with deadly calm. "I told him that if he tried to depose me and dispossess my children, he and his friend had better come with swords in their hands and an army at their backs. I do not endure insolence and treachery... from *anyone*. Now, if you please, Brangaine requires her jewelry for the feast. There is no need to pack for her journey, of course, until the day after tomorrow. She *will* be leaving with me."

"I forbid it! 'Tis an outrage! You steal from others, not satisfied with four of your own spawning —"

Brangaine's shame burst from her lips. She struck out at her mother, in full cry.

"Stop it! Just stop it! You spoil everything! Everything you touch, everything you say is ugly! I hate you! I *hate* you!"

Her mother's ringing slap knocked her back, and Brangaine stumbled, perilously close to the edge of the walkway. Mother grasped at her, her strong fingers digging in like talons. Brangaine shoved her away, stumbled again —

— And fell from the bridge, screaming, tumbling over and over in midair. Dissolving into the wind were Mother's screams and the Queen's screams, blended like the strange song Brangaine heard in the Fade.

She stretched out her arms to slow her fall, her gown snapping like the tail of a kite. Something unfolded from deep within her, layer upon layer, and molten peace flowed throughout her body. Her arms stretched, and stretched, and caught the cool, invisible currents.

— And she was flying.

Soaring really, low over the castle courtyard, with men and horses in miniature, like the view from the High Tower. People pointed and called out, children ran out to stare. Brangaine saw Rica far below, shading her eyes with her hand, her straw-colored hair catching the light. Brangaine wanted to wave at her, but she needed her wings for flying.

Wait.

Wings?

Her lovely lavender sleeve was now... somehow... a broad lavender wing. A very distinctive sort of wing: the kind she knew from the dragon caverns.

She almost panicked, which would have been fatal. Instead, she kept her eyes on the horizon, and began a careful banking turn. The Queen must be in a state. It was easy to explain though. She had shape-shifted out of self-preservation. Her unconscious mind — the part that worked hardest when she was in the Fade — had made the connection between the color of her gown and the dragon hide on it, and had caused her to take the form of a dragon, rather than of a bird or a bat. It was... obvious, really. The fact that she had dragonhide on her clothing had eased the change.

A whoop of triumph escaped her, and it came out as a roar that echoed through the mountains. She flapped her wings, rejoicing in her power, and rose up into the burning blue of springtime. Mother was a hawk, chasing her, scolding her, uttering a frantic "Cree, cree, cree!" Brangaine turned her head on her magnificently long neck and roared back, coughing out a sputter of flame that surprised them both. The hawk darted away to avoid a singeing, and returned to the bridge, changing back into her human form. The next time Brangaine looked, she saw the Queen and Mother engaged in a furious quarrel. She flew closer, and zoomed over their heads and back, unable to catch more than a few words.

"— Liar!" the Queen raged. "You've lied to us for years. You've lied about everything. How smug you've been, knowing you tricked us all! Even the name was a mockery! I suppose Anders —"

"— hadn't, you'd be dead! All your great plans —"

"— You did it for yourself! You did it for your own selfish reasons, the only reasons you've ever done anything! Get out of my sight! I don't want —"

She was tall and terrible, and Mother must have been truly frightened, for she ran back to the Mages' Tower. Brangaine knew that there would be trouble later, but for now, she only knew glorious freedom.

The Queen was still on the bridge, and her posture radiated fury and alarm. Brangaine felt the link between them more strongly than ever before. She glided in for a landing, back-

winging clumsily. The Queen was still watching her, terribly upset. Her green eyes were absolutely wild.

Oh, Maker. How do I change back now?

She had overheard her share of lessons, but it was one thing to eavesdrop, and another to put the teaching to the proof. She steadied herself on the walkway, and to reassure the Queen, assumed the humble posture adopted by imprinted young dragons. She concentrated hard, and then concentrated again.

It was like a full-body sneeze in reverse. Brangaine swayed, but did not fall. She gave Queen Bronwyn a tremulous smile.

She wondered why the Queen looked so very, very sad.

"Urthemiel," Bronwyn whispered mournfully. "How could I not have known?"

"I'm sorry?" Brangaine asked, not understanding. Still, the name thrilled her, like a great line from a poem. She wondered what caused the Queen to think of the Archdemon at this moment. She approached her nervously, hoping the Queen was not angry.

"I thought I was going to die."

Were those tears in the Queen's eyes? Queen Bronwyn never cried. But now she was, and she put out her arms to Brangaine, and held her close. Brangaine wondered if the Queen felt that powerful bond, as strong as blood, surging between them now, the way Brangaine did.

"I turned into a dragon!" Brangaine whispered, trembling with excitement.

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"I saw you," the Queen whispered back, her voice oddly choked. "A splendid dragon."

"Can I still come to Denerim?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I think that's best. Yes." She wiped her eyes. "Maker's Breath! You need to be as far from Soldier's Peak as possible. We shall travel to Denerim, and you shall study music and magic and art all you like. And we shall go together to the Cathedral to pray to Andraste for strength and courage. Perhaps we shall go even farther than that, and make a pilgrimage to her shrine in the Frostbacks."

Brangaine saw it all, like the kingdoms of the earth spread out before her. "When I'm big enough, we can fly there together."

"And so we shall."

A horn sounded below in the valley, summoning them to the feast.

THE END OF VICTORY AT OSTAGAR



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IN THE STORIES AND SONGS:

Eglantine's song is translated and adapted from a song of the character Mignon in WILHELM MEISTER'S APPRENTICESHIP (original: WILHELM MEISTERS LEHRJAHRE), the second novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published in 1795-96.

Leliana tells a benign version of Grimm's THE TWELVE DANCING PRINCESSES. In another version they collected, "The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces," eleven of the princesses are beheaded by their father for lying to him. Only the terrified youngest confesses what she's been up to, and then is married to — in this case — a peasant. In a German/Hungarian variant, "The Invisible Shepherd Boy," all the princesses — except for the youngest, who tattles on them — are burned at the stake as sorceresses.

In chapter 12, Celandine remembers a Thedosian version of "Le Sire de Framboisy." Here is the complex text and an English translation:

*C'était l'histoire du Sire de Framboisy,
Avait pris femme, la plus belle du pays,
La prit trop jeune, bientôt s'en repentit.
Partit en guerre, afin qu'elle murît.
Revint de guerre après cinq ans et d'mi.
N'trouva personne de la cave au chenil.
App'la la belle trois jours et quatre nuits.
Un grand silence, hélas, lui répondit.*

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*Le pauvre Sire courut dans tout Paris.
Trouva la dame, dans un bal à Clichy,
Corbleu, princesse, que faites-vous ici ?
Voyez, je danse, avecque mes amis
Dans son carosse la r'mène à Framboisy
Il l'empoisonne avec du vert-de-gris.
Et sur sa fosse il sema du persil.
De cette histoire, la morale, la voici :
À jeune femme il faut jeune mari.*

In English:

Here is the tale of the Lord of Framboisy,
Who had taken as wife the most beautiful girl in the country.
Took her too young, quickly regretted it
Went to war so that she could mature.
Returned from war after five and a half years,
Found nobody from cellar to kennel.
Called the fair lady for three days and four nights,
A great silence, alas, answered him.
The poor Lord ran all over Paris,
Found the lady at a ball in Clichy.
Egad, princess, what are you doing here?
See, I'm dancing, with my friends,
In his coach, brings her back to Framboisy.
He poisons her with verdigris.

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And on her tomb he sowed parsley,
Here is the moral to this tale:

A young woman needs a young husband.

"Over the Hills and Far Away" is a traditional English song dating back to at least the late 17th century. One version appeared in George Farquhar's 1706 play, THE RECRUITING OFFICER. Many others exist, one notably used in the Sharpe films, set during the Napoleonic Wars. Thank you to sizuka2, who suggested its use.

Bronwyn's tale of THE WILD SWANS OF HIGHEVER is original with me, but derived from a great deal of Indo-European folklore. Within the context of Thedas, the story predates the Couslands, who coopted it into their family history when they took over Highever. Ostap and Bustrum's remarks indicate that there was an ancient religious taboo regarding swans.

Most of Bustrum's story about the ancient kings is Chapter 18 is borrowed from Mary Renault's wonderful historical novel about the hero Theseus, THE KING MUST DIE.

And, on to the Chapter Notes.

CHAPTER 3:

An x-shaped chair is also called a Savonarola chair. Google the images under that name. Since there was no Savonarola chair in Thedas, I used the other term. Or use "inlaid Savonarola chair" to be more precise as to what Bronwyn was using.

For those who do not follow the Dragon Age game. The



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amulet in Morrigan's possession is a horcrux: Flemeth's horcrux. In DA2, Hawke and company are persuaded to take it to Kirkwall when they escape from the Blight. A Dalish ritual causes Flemeth to rise again and fly away in her dragon form, obviously to wreak more mischief.

CHAPTER 5:

The Orlesian fleet is not as big as the Spanish Armada, which was composed of 22 warships and 108 converted merchantman. There were also a number of small vessels accompanying them. On the other hand, Celene had not been planning her invasion as long as Philip II. For that matter, the Fereldans did not have the naval power that the English possessed. While the English ships were much smaller than the Spanish, and heavily outgunned, there were around 200 of them. Ferelden can only muster a total of two dozen at the most, and some of them are privateers and converted fishing boats and merchantmen.

English theatre has never paid much attention to the Aristotelian unities. They have been powerfully influential, however, in European dramaturgy. It's one of the reasons that many Europeans, up until the mid-19th century, thought Shakespeare barbarous. Big sprawling plays like King Lear, with its many locations and huge cast, made no sense to them.

CHAPTER 6:

According to canon, Enchanter Rhys is the son of Wynne, taken from her at his birth.



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My list of Circles is from the Dragon Age Wiki. However, I have tossed out the Jainen Circle of Ferelden, which is only referenced in the Google+ and Facebook Game DRAGON AGE: LEGENDS. It is not mentioned anywhere else, and since it had no role in ORIGINS, I refuse to believe it actually exists. As to the others, remember that while the Rivaini Circle was annulled, that was not until 9:39-40, and the Starkhaven Circle did not burn until around 9:31-32 (estimate). Thus, they still exist.

For the fate of the Orlesian fleet, I was influenced by a dated but readable account of the destruction of the Imperial Russian Baltic fleet at the Battle of Tsushima during the Russo-Japanese War. (THE FLEET THAT HAD TO DIE, by Richard Hough). Among other reasons, the Russian defeat was primarily due to three factors: the deficiencies of the Russian warships and their crews, the poor leadership of their admiral, and the choice of the route.

CHAPTER 10:

Bronwyn's remark about destroying enemies by making friends of them is stolen from Abraham Lincoln's many words of wisdom.

CHAPTER 11:

The Airbow somewhat resembles Varric's crossbow from DA2, which is actually a repeating spring-bow. I really don't see why the dwarves wouldn't have previously developed such a weapon. Their other bows are a puzzlement to me. Bone is really not a good substance for long bows or short bows. Cross-



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bows, yes. Dwarves have next to no access to wood. It is a very expensive imported item. However, they have lots of metal and have built many devices that no doubt required machining. I'm sure they can make good gears, pistons, and springs. A spring bow or an air gun, either pumped or with an air cartridge, seem well within their capabilities. I am trying to avoid using the term "firing the weapon" in reference to it, since it does not involve a chemical component like gunpowder.

The inscription on the eluvian is taken from the elven song "Suledin," which is played during the dungeon escape portion of the Leliana's Song DLC. It is another reason that I suspect Leliana's mother was an elf.

As to why Morrigan could use the eluvian under Drake's Fall in the WITCH HUNT DLC: we know that she lived among the Dalish for a time before stealing the book about the eluvian. She read about the ritual, and it would be easy for her to gather a small amount of elven blood, which she used to open the gate. She used the first incantation in Chapter 11, which was the one appropriate to that particular eluvian. Where it took her, I cannot say, but she had reason to believe that Flemeth could not follow her there.

CHAPTER 12:

I have posited a situation in which not all elves were killed or enslaved at the fall of Arlathan. Instead, some escaped by ship, leaving the eluvian and some clues. Since Thedas cannot cover even a quarter of the planet, there



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must be other continents. The elves went to one of those, to the east of the Amaranthine Ocean, and have developed an advanced culture, resisting any threat to their coastline. Humans are regarded as humans regard darkspawn: as polluting threats to life as the elves know it. Perhaps a few storm-tossed human sailors or Qunari explorers made landfall there, but they did not live long.

The greater celandine is a member of the poppy family and has four yellow petals. The lesser celandine is a member of the buttercup family. I think it's much prettier. That's right, Princess Buttercup.

CHAPTER 13:

I gave Kylon the first name Daniel as a shout-out to mille libri and her wonderful stories "Freely We Serve" and "Dangerous to Travel to Known Places."

The magister was Caladrius from canon.

CHAPTER 14:

The quote 'The Orlesians are a gay and polite people, fond of dancing and light wines,' is a paraphrase from REBECCA OF SUNNYBROOK FARM, by Kate Douglas Wiggin, which if you have not read, you should not scorn. It's actually a very good novel for young girls. I'm fond of 19th and early 20th century children's literature. The quote is of course about the French. Here is the rest of the passage:

"I asked the teacher what light wines were, and he thought it was something like new cider, or maybe ginger pop. I can see

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Paris as plain as day by just shutting my eyes. The beautiful ladies are always gaily dancing around with pink sunshades and bead purses, and the grand gentlemen are politely dancing and drinking ginger pop. But you can see Milltown most every day with your eyes wide open," Rebecca said wistfully.

"Milltown ain't no great, neither," replied Mr. Cobb, with the air of having visited all the cities of the earth and found them as naught.

CHAPTER 17:

Riordan is incorrect about the Tower of Shadows. He does not know about the Warden prison in the Vimmarks, which predates the Tower of Shadows by over 200 years.

Empress Celene regarded Florestan as stupid and bid-dable. However, beware the unreliable narrator.

CHAPTER 18:

I totally made up Caius Corvanni, the Warden who ended the Third Blight. There is nothing in the DA wiki about who ended that one, so I made some deductions. It was a joint army of Orlesians and Tevinters who fought the final battle at Hunter Fell. If an Orlesian Warden had ended the Blight, the Orlesians would never have shut up about it. Therefore, my guess is that it was a Tevinter Warden. Moreover, since nobody even knows his name in the southern lands, let's guess that it was a mage. So, yeah. My head canon about the end of the Third Blight is that Toth was taken down by a powerful Tevinter mage Warden. Bronwyn only knows about

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him because she read about him at the Shaperate, which possesses information that the human nations would find annoying for cultural and religious reasons.

CHAPTER 21:

The Dark Ritual is a controversial subject. I really cannot explain Morrigan's fixation on it, and now believe she must be under something like a post-hypnotic suggestion or a magical equivalent. The idea that she could control an Old God is simply absurd. At some point the Old God would assert itself and that would be the end of her. My own view is that Flemeth is simply once again planning on using her as a vessel – this time not for Flemeth herself, but for the Old God. Once she gives birth, she's superfluous.

However, I must thank Tirion I for the fascinating idea about Flemeth and why she appears shortly after the slaying of the Old God Toth. It could explain why Flemeth is so certain that the Dark Ritual will work. I do not think it is contradictory for the Dark Ritual to have been successful and for the slayer of the Archdemon still to have died. Plenty of things can kill a Warden in battle. I have been informed that the original idea should be attributed to Archon Gaius Lucius Vindicus Caesar III. Hail, Caesar!

To my knowledge, the term "high-functioning ghoul" for Grey Wardens was coined by Sarah1281.

I see no reason why Tevinter Wardens, with their large number of mages and sophisticated facilities (plus an



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unending number of slave test-subjects) could not independently come up with an improved Joining potion similar to that devised by Avernus. And they would never, never tell anyone else about it, except perhaps the First Warden.

CHAPTER 22:

We know that in canon Riordan went into battle with some ideas about how to fight dragons. I would guess that he, unlike everybody else, had been doing some research. The technique he tries unsuccessfully in canon works quite well (implausibly well, perhaps) for Cassandra Pentaghost in *DAWN OF THE SEEKER*.

Thanks to Nemrut, for a very useful tactical suggestion. Why couldn't the Tevinters, with their power and their grasp of elemental magic, use Earth magic to reshape the battlefield to their needs?

epilogue 1:

Some of you might wonder why Aveline was not considered for the post of Warden-Commander. I didn't think it would be believable for all the old hands to stand back for her. Tara and Carver have seniority, and they were both much closer to Bronwyn, which would count for a lot. Carver also has very influential relatives, and that, in a feudal society, would be seen as a plus. Aveline's father was an Orlesian chevalier, which would not help her. Finally, we know from *DA2* that Aveline and Carver really don't get on. I don't think that would change. The difference here is that instead of Aveline



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getting a leg up into the Kirkwall guard, and then blackballing Carver, it's Carver who has the leg up. He's not about to stand back for a woman he doesn't particularly like.

As to the dragon-breeding experiment, I have taken the idea from a famous experiment conducted in Siberia with foxes. By the eighth generation, they're as tame as dogs. Dragons are much smarter and more useful, of course.

epilogue 2:

An Old God has absolutely nothing to fear from any being in the Fade. They're top predator there. Urthemiel is, of course, the God of Beauty. Did anyone in the Dragon Age (and I include Flemeth, who might well make an appearance someday, and Morrigan) ever stop to think what that meant, or had the lore of the Old Gods faded so completely that they were all lumped together as identical?

It's one thing for Flemeth to rear and control Morrigan. For Morrigan to think she could control an Old God in the same way was foolish hubris. By the time that Morrigan realized that she needed to isolate Brangaine to better control her, it was too late.

Zevran was saved from the Taint by the last dose of Ashes. Thus, he is here a knight rather than a Warden.

For Loghain, Maric will always come first: before Rowan, before Celia, before Anora, before anyone. Much of it no doubt is due to the trauma of his father's death. Furthermore, I think Loghain has a martyr complex and a streak of masochism. He would absolutely glory in doing what he would



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consider not only a right thing, but something that would cause him personal misery. He may return: one never knows.

I spelled Urthemiel's mortal name as Brangaine rather than Brongaine, because Brangaine is an actual name from Arthurian legend.

ADDITIONAL NOTE:

In the course of thinking about and writing this epic, I listened often to some of Vangelis' music for the film *Alexander*. If you want to follow my mental soundtrack, here are my titles, followed by the soundtrack designations: Tracks 1, 13, and 17 had a huge impact on the development of the story.

Track 1: DAWN OVER OSTAGAR (*INTRODUCTION*)

Track 2: BRONWYN COUSLAND (*YOUNG ALEXANDER*)

Track 3: THE WARDEN TREATIES (*TITANS*)

Track 4: THE DEEP ROADS (*THE DRUMS OF GAUGAMELA*)

Track 5: ANORA'S GARDEN (*ONE MORNING IN PELLA*)

Track 7: THE BRECILIAN FOREST (*EASTERN PATH*)

Track 11: SHIELDWALLS AND SIEGE ENGINES (*THE CHARGE*)

Track 12: CLIMBING THE ROCK (*PREPARATION*)

Track 13: ALONG THE IMPERIAL HIGHWAY (*ACROSS THE MOUNTAINS*)

Track 14: THE SHRINE OF THE ASHES (*CHANT*)

Track 15: BLIGHT LANDS (*IMMORTALITY*)

Track 16: THE FLIGHT OF THE ARCHDEMON (*DREAMS OF BABYLON*)

Track 17: BRONWYN'S PYRE, or, if you prefer, THE WARDENS' PYRE
(*ETERNAL ALEXANDER*)



COLOPHON

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Special mention should probably also be extended to Jack Davis and Linea Dayton for their efforts in producing *The Photoshop 7 One-Click WOW Book*.

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