

The Age of Dragons

PrettyFrog

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Duncan goes out looking for recruits. He gets a few more than he bargained for. Now it's up to a dwarven princess to somehow turn a carta thug, a dalish story-teller, a noble archer, an elven warrior, and a circle mage into an army.

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by
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1. Chapter 1

Saitada sighed at her reflection. The antique armor was certainly impressive, but she couldn't help but feel overdone in steel made more for show than for battle. At least she'd managed to convince Lord Harrowmont that it wouldn't do for her to attend a feast celebrating her military command while wearing a surface silk gown. Grumbling, she threw the helmet onto the bed as the door behind her opened.

Gorim entered, pretending not to notice as the helmet clattered to the floor. "Greetings, my lady. You are dressed and ready. Excellent. I couldn't find the armor's matching dagger, but I scrounged up a rather fancy long sword. Do you wish to wear your shield to the noble's feast?"

She nodded, twisting her crimson hair into a tight bun atop her head and fixing it with an elf-made pin. "Yes. Let them see me as a warrior."

Gorim shut the door firmly and responded, "as opposed to the Paragon of Beauty?" He gave her a low, appreciative whistle.

A laugh escaped. "Close the door," she murmured in a sultry tone. "I'll show you a Paragon of Beauty."

Gorim snorted. "Don't you remember how this game goes? I

get undressed, then one of your brothers or cousins appears and thrashes me. I'll take my chances somewhere outside the palace if you don't mind." He gave her an appreciative glance. "Well... thoughts for later, I suppose." He winked at her playfully, and his voice changed from flirtatious to businesslike, "moving on to the business at hand... The king expects you to make an appearance at the feast, but there's no rush. The noble family heads will spend hours boring your father with petitions and petty grievances."

Saitada nodded. "What shall we do in the meantime?"

"As part of the celebrations, permits have been auctioned off to members of the Merchant Caste who wished to sell wares in the Diamond Quarter. Lord Harrowmont has also opened up the Provings for young warriors to test their mettle before the upcoming battle." He gave her a wry look. "Rumor has it that Harrowmont hopes you'll be swept off your feet if a well-placed young nobleman wins the Provings in your honor."

"I could use a little sweeping off my feet," she said thoughtfully, adjusting the sword and shield strapped to her back.

"I've got a well-built, magical broom just for you." Gorim grinned. "But that's for later. What shall we do now?"

She shrugged. "The Proving sounds appealing. Let's go have a look."

"With you as always, my lady. The day is ours until the feast."

#

Movement caught her eye as they walked past her brother Bhelen's room. A rather lovely dwarven woman stepped out of the door. "My Lord Bhelen?" the coy, downcast expression turned abruptly to panic. "Oh! Oh, I'm sorry... I am so sorry, your Highness." Covering her mouth with her hand, the young woman fled back into Bhelen's room. Saitada exchanged an amused look with Gorim before following.

The flustered young woman stammered apologies, looking like she wished the stone would swallow her up where she stood. "I...I'm sorry. I thought you were Prince Bhelen coming down the hall. I...Forgive me."

Saitada held up a hand in a calming gesture and made her voice gentle. "Who are you?"

Gorim shuffled his feet a moment before responding for the girl. "She's...er...it seems she's one of your brother Bhelen's newest...um, companions. Prince Bhelen is attending the feast being held in Lady Aeducan's honor."

"No harm done," Saitada said to the young woman.

The girl shook slightly and got her breathing back under control. "I will show myself out, with your leave, my lady."

Saitada smiled. "Stay, if you and Bhelen would prefer. I will pretend I didn't see you." She gestured for Gorim to follow her out of the room before allowing herself to smile. "She's..."

pretty."

"I didn't notice."

"Liar."

#

A scuffle was taking place just off the steps of the royal palace. Lord Vollney, in full armor, loomed over a smaller dwarf in scholar's robes. Vollney kept tapping his fingers against his warhammer as if contemplating violence.

"Please, Master Vollney," the scholar was saying. "My work is accredited by the shaper!"

"These books are lies written by the enemies of House Vollney."

"I write only what I find in the ancient records! Lady Aeducan!" the scholar cried out, ruining Saitada's thought of just walking by and ignoring the situation. "You can vouch for my work, can't you? Your father loved my "History of Aeducan: Paragon, King, Peacemaker!""

Saitada planted a pleasant expression on her face. "Ah, I greatly enjoyed that book as well."

"This worm has written a book that slanders my house!" Vollney thundered.

"That's a serious charge," Saitada responded skeptically.

Vollney continued, apparently mistaking her comment for agreement. "He deserves to die for what he has written of Paragon Vollney!"

She rubbed her hand against her forehead and sighed. "What exactly has he written, Bruntin?"

The irate lord turned to face her, punctuating his words with grand, overwrought gestures. "He says that Vollney - - the Paragon who founded my house, known throughout the world as the greatest of men - - was a fraud!"

"N-not precisely," the scholar interjected quickly. "When the Assembly names a Paragon, that man or woman is then, by definition, everything one can aspire to be in the world. They form their own noble houses, and are revered as living ancestors. But Paragons start off as men."

"Vollney was more than a man!" Lord Vollney interrupted, taking a step towards the scholar.

Saitada moved to head Vollney off, her voice sharp. "Bruntin, you're acting like a fool."

"Am I?" He tried to loom over her, apparently forgetting that they were, in fact, standing on the steps of the royal palace, surrounded by guards loyal to her family. "Would you allow this coward to slander your ancestors?"

"I have written no slander!" the scholar pleaded. "Vollney became a Paragon by the narrowest margin in history - - one

vote. A vote mired in rumors of intimidation, intrigue, and outright bribery. The records of that vote are kept in the Shaperate and are a matter of fact. Not liking history doesn't make it any less true!"

"The scholar is right," Saitada said firmly, holding a hand up to Vollney, arresting his attempt at forward motion.

Vollney gave her a frustrated look. "You're taking his side? What if he published a book like this about your Paragon Aeducan?"

"The truth is more important than your pride," Saitada responded calmly.

"You would not say so if it was your house, but I shall respect your wishes. For now. Excuse me, your Highness."

Behind her, Gorim bristled at the implied threat. "That fool has no idea how weak his house is, or how low he sits in it. Shall I have him killed, my lady?"

Stone save her from posturing menfolk. "What do you think, scholar?" she asked.

The scholar appeared startled by the question, and spoke hesitantly. "Well... historically it has been prudent to eliminate a small threat before it becomes larger..."

She sighed, and turned back to Gorim. "He's not worth a blade. Leave him be."

"As you say," Gorim responded with a note of reluctance.

As he gathered the papers Vollney had knocked to the ground, the scholar gushed, "you've shown House Aeducan a friend to research, history, and the glory of our people."

"Carry on with your work, scholar," she responded, already moving away.

"Of course. I have much to document and organize. Good day, your Highness, and thank you."

#

Though she did not intend to make any purchases, browsing the merchant booths was always an excellent way to get a feel for the moods of Orzammar. Today's market seemed heavy on surface goods, silks and perfumes. Even a few of the smith crafters were showing examples of elfish made bows. She thought for a moment about purchasing one, but ultimately decided against it. The bow had never been her weapon, and she was sure some Deshyr or another would read more into the purchase than her simple curiosity was worth.

"Greetings, my lady," spoke a young dwarven woman, dressed in the latest fashion. "May I say you look striking today? Is this your paramour? He wears both his vambraces... unmarried and eligible!"

For a moment, Saitada felt as though Gorim was trying to

hide behind her. "I'm flattered, ladies, but I'm not a noble. I'm a knight of the Warrior Caste," he answered.

"Warrior Caste isn't bad..." the young woman tapped her lips thoughtfully as she gave Gorim an admiring look.

The slightly older woman with her admonished, "Teli, we didn't pay gold for these permits to take Warrior Caste."

"I guess you're right. Sorry ser."

Saitada gave Gorim an amused look. "What's going on here?"

"They're noble-hunters, my lady. Because a man takes his caste from his father, they hope to bear a noble lord's son. If a noble-hunter succeeds, she is raised up to join the house as a concubine to care for her son. It brings new swords to a house, so many nobles look favorably upon such women."

The women started to shift nervously. Saitada gave her words a tone of approval, "we could certainly use more Aeducan swords."

"Then perhaps you'd tell your brothers to come say hello?" responded the younger woman, her voice a little breathless.

"Teli, mind your manners," the older woman gasped, but Saitada didn't miss the hopeful look.

"No, it's all right. I will mention you."

"My lady is kind and generous beyond her duty," the older

woman responded gratefully.

Gorim glanced at Saitada as they walked away, and caught the ghost of a smile. "You'll mention them?"

Saitada smiled. "Who knows? Perhaps a night with a couple lovely ladies could calm Trian down. And if he had sons to distract him, maybe he'd leave the rest of us alone for a while."

Gorim shrugged. "I'm not entirely certain Trian would know what to do with them if you left them both on his bed wearing nothing but ribbons."

Saitada pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Ooh, there is an idea. I think I know what to get you for your name-day. What do you want, blond, brunette?"

Gorim smirked. "Anything but a redhead. Those are way too much trouble."

Saitada laughed.

#

Saitada cursed softly. Trian was walking towards her, shadowed by Bhelen. She planted a polite smile on her face as she strode forward to meet her brothers.

Bhelen's own smile was cheerful. "Atrast vala, big sister! How surprising to run into you out among the common folk."

Trian didn't bother with a smile. His face was set in lines of harsh disapproval. "Especially since duty requires you attend our king father at the feast today. Have you so little respect for him to disregard his wishes on a day set aside for you?"

Behind her, Gorim spoke up. "Lord Harrowmont told me we wouldn't be need for hours at least -"

"Silence! If I want the opinion of my sibling's second, I will ask for it." Trian didn't even bother to look at Gorim.

"Yes, your Highness," Gorim said before taking a slight step backwards.

Saitada bristled slightly. "Don't speak to Gorim like that."

Trian gave her a surprised and irritated look. "I'll speak to the lower houses and castes as they should be spoken to. Now do as I say."

Saitada rolled her eyes. "All right, I'm going."

Trian gave what almost passed as a smile. "Perhaps you were right, Bhelen, when you said our sister wasn't all useless breeding flesh." He must have seen her flinch, because his tone and face softened slightly. "I'll be along later to toast your command." He looked for a moment like he wanted to say something else, then he shook his head. "Come, Bhelen."

Gorim stepped towards her. He started to put a hand on her shoulder before remembering they were in public. Instead, he

planted a cheerful smile on his face. "That was fun. Nothing like being talked down to by the next king."

Saitada closed her eyes for a moment, then shrugged. "He means well."

Gorim couldn't quite keep the frustration out of his voice. "You always defend him I wish I had your understanding..."

The corners of her lips twitched as she fought to regain her earlier good mood. She forced her voice to become light. "I didn't even get to tell him about the pretty girls."

Gorim gave her a slight nod. "Somehow I think Trian isn't in the mood for that sort of thing right now... or ever." He jerked his head in the opposite direction of the palace. Her oldest friend knew her well. "Shall we?"

#

They walked through the market. Gorim watched Saitada move easily through the crowd, smiling and making polite conversation with merchant, noble, and guard alike. He noted more than a few were reduced to stammers by the kind smile of the princess. Tapping the hilt of his sword, he gave a glare to a young guard whose eyes wandered inappropriately, and saw a blush creep up the boy's cheeks. Not that he could really blame the kid. He shook his head, and followed her towards a booth displaying a variety of fine weaponry.

The merchant hesitated, then spoke. "Greetings, My Lady

Aeducan. I am... so honored to have you visit my booth. I have a... proposition, but I dared not approach."

Gorim stepped forward, narrowing his eyes. "Yet you dare now?"

A raised hand from Saitada held him back. "It's all right. I'll hear him out."

Gorim nodded. "Very well, then. Speak."

The merchant shuffled his feet, eyes flicking to Gorim's sword before he turned his attention back to the princess. "Um, yes, just so. Here is the thing. What I mean to say is..."

"It's all right," Saitada said, her voice warm.

The merchant blushed slightly. "Sorry. So nervous. I had a dagger made. For you. As a gift for your first command. I, uh, sent a messenger to deliver the dagger to you. Prince Trian had him thrown out." He held up his hands as he rushed to reassure the princess. "I don't know what offense he caused, but I had him beaten severely."

Saitada exchanged a look with Gorim, and he saw irritation in her eyes before she glanced back at the merchant. "I'm sure Trian has his reasons."

He nodded, clutching an item to him. "Won't you at least look at the dagger?"

"I'll take a look, but no promises."

"Of course! A thousand thanks to you. Here... here it is, your Highness." He held out the dagger as though he were offering his firstborn child.

Gorim couldn't quite keep the admiration out of his voice. "That's an amazing piece, merchant."

"You do me much honor, ser. The blade has been crafted over a period of two years by masters of every art. I wish to bless the Lady's first command, and hope that someday, when she rules, she will wear it."

Gorim felt a chill in his blood. Dangerous words to speak aloud, in the middle of a public market. "Trian is heir. He will rule when King Endrin returns to the Stone."

"If the Assembly wills it. Forgive me, ser, but whispers say the second child of Endrin will be chosen."

"Whispers, indeed. It's a princely gift. If Trian recognizes it, though, it may send the wrong message." His hand itched to clasp the hilt of his sword, then he caught the expression on the face of the princess. "Or the right one, depending on your view."

"I'll take the dagger." Saitada's voice was contemplative.

"Thank you! You bring uncountable honor to me." He handed it to her, and Gorim saw actual tears in the man's eyes.

He kept his own voice light. "What he means is that you'll bring

uncountable gold to him if you wear that piece in public."

#

Saitada was nearly to the gate when a guard stepped into her path. "My lady. Are you heading to the Proving Arena?"

She smiled. "Yes. I intend to watch the Provings."

The guard nodded. "We have been charged with the task of escorting you to the Proving grounds."

Gorim saw her face go a bit murderous, and spoke up quickly. "I clean forgot about that. Forgive me, I should have informed you sooner. The king decided you are not to travel through the commons unguarded."

"I am quite capable of walking safely to the Proving." Gorim heard the sword in her voice, and saw the guard start to melt under the weight of the princess's gaze.

Gorim coughed. "I did mention the merchants that won permits to show their goods in the Diamond Quarter?" he said delicately. "There were only so many permits auctioned off, and quite a few were turned away. Your father fears you will be harassed on the way to the Proving."

He saw relief flood into the face of the guard as she nodded. "This is silly, but I will comply."

"Will we be leaving then?" the guard asked.

"Yes."

"We are at your command."

"You are Padar, yes? Of house Turin?" Saitada asked the leader of the guard.

He swallowed. "Yes, my lady."

"I hear you held a passage against four hurlocks on the most recent excursion."

Gorim smiled to himself as he watched the princess put the men at ease. It took only moments for Padar to begin to lose the businesslike tone, and the two younger guards were well on their way to being her loyal vassals by the time they'd reached the Arena gate.

#

The proving master glanced in their direction, then glanced again and quickly got to his feet. "Your Highness, it is an honor to have you here. Have you come to watch these brave warriors do battle in your honor?"

Saitada rolled her shoulders. "No, I've come to fight." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gorim place his palm over his face and shake his head.

"Your Highness, this Proving is in your honor..."

"Then honor her by doing as she says. Lady Aeducan will fight

in this Proving," Gorim said.

"I will honor today's warriors by testing their skills," Saitada said.

"Of course. It is well within your rights." He went to the podium. "Men and women of Orzammar, we have a late entry to these Provings, held for the honor of House Aeducan. I give you... the Lady Aeducan, herself!"

#

Gorim tried to keep his excitement contained as he watched his friend enter the duel. Beside him, the two younger guards were less restrained, openly cheering for the princess. One started to make a comment when the Lady Aeducan went toe to toe with Adal Helmi, then glanced at Gorim nervously. Gorim couldn't quite blame him. There was something about two beautiful women squaring off in the proving that could get the blood flowing.

For a moment, he thought wistfully back to the days when he and the princess had been foolish and rather randy teenagers. Then he laughed at himself and turned his attention back to the proving. Frandlin Ivo fought well, even managing to land a hit before Saitada swept his legs out from under him.

Hopefully, she'd gotten it all out of her system now.

#

The proving master was practically beaming when she returned to where he was standing. "Congratulations. Frandlin Ivo is as fierce a competitor as I've ever seen. You've vanquished every warrior of note in today's Proving. The ceremonial helm commissioned by your father for today's winner is yours."

Saitada inclined her head gracefully. "Send it to Frandlin Ivo. He fought bravely."

The proving master looked surprised, then approval lit his face. "The people will remember your honor and generosity for all time."

She gave him one of her warm smiles before turning to the guards. "I am ready to leave."

Padar nodded. "Your wish is our command."

The two younger guards could barely contain their excitement on the way back, and nearly fell over themselves congratulating the princess. Gorim exchanged a look with Padar, who merely rolled his eyes before resuming his businesslike expression. They parted ways with the princess promising to come cheer the young men on when they fought in the next proving.

Gorim fell into step behind her. "Harrowmont is going to be annoyed." He caught her catlike smile. "Which you intended."

"It's not the matchmaking that bothers me as much as the fact

that he thinks I don't actually know what he's doing."

Gorim chuckled.

2. Chapter 2

Duncan stood quietly, watching the various dwarven nobles scheme. Honored guests the wardens might be in the dwarven halls, their presence was not enough to put even the slightest pause to the manipulations. Hopefully, they could get what they came for and be on their way before they got enmeshed into too many plots.

There was a minor stir to the crowd, and he glanced towards the door. A dwarven woman had entered, and was being respectfully greeted. This then, would be the princess. He saw her note him and move in his direction, and straightened before giving her a formal bow. "Greetings, my Lady Aeducan. It is an honor to meet you at last."

To his surprise, she returned the bow. "The honor is mine, Warden."

"I have had the opportunity to recently meet with your father. He speaks highly of you. He says you may be the most skilled warrior in all of House Aeducan."

She gave him a warm smile, stepping back from the crowd so that they could speak more privately. "There is no may about it, I am the best."

Despite himself, he laughed. "Yes, he mentioned your humble nature as well." He found himself drawn in by the smile. "We need more Grey Wardens like you. Even as the darkspawn weaken here in Orzammar, they are stirring on the surface. A Blight has begun. Soon the fight must go beyond the Deep Roads, lest the darkspawn threaten all the world."

To his surprise, her face became contemplative. "I wonder if Father would allow me to join you."

Duncan blinked, then chuckled. "Alas, I do not think he would take kindly to that suggestion. As the child of the king and heir after Lord Trian, your place is here."

"True, I belong with my father and brothers, but it is the duty of the royal family to protect Orzammar from the darkspawn. And that means aiding the Grey Wardens in whatever manner we may." Her words gave him a surge of hope that perhaps this trip wasn't wasted after all. "I admit, I do not know as much as I should about the Grey Wardens."

"You know of our dedication to destroying the darkspawn, our frontline presence during a Blight. What else would you know?"

"Are there many of my people in the Grey Wardens?"

"Over the centuries, many dwarves have made names for themselves in our order. These days, however, there are fewer dwarves and thus fewer dwarven Grey Wardens. A pity, since dwarven warriors have the most experience fighting

darkspawn."

"What does joining entail?"

"Being a Grey Warden means abandoning all ties to your old life. It means dedicating yourself to destroying the darkspawn."

"Now that is something worthwhile. Alas, I am an Aeducan, and Orzammar needs me here." Her voice actually sounded regretful.

"Then it is a good thing you have other paths before you. Some are not so lucky."

"A fair point. Tell me, do you recruit only from the warrior and noble castes?"

"We take those worthy to be Grey Wardens where we find them."

"I must attend to my father now, but I would like to speak with you on the morrow. I may be able to help you on finding some worthy."

"That would be most kind of you." He kept his face polite, but he had a feeling he'd just become enmeshed in a plot.

"Now it is time for deshyrs and speeches. Enjoy the feast, be careful of the ale."

"I wish you luck, and will speak with you again in the morning."

After meeting with Endrin and Trian, the princess had been almost like a breath of fresh air, despite the fact she clearly had something up her sleeve. Endrin doted on his only daughter. If she could convince him to render more aid than just a few speeches, then perhaps whatever she planned was not too high a price to pay.

The brilliant red of her hair made her easy to follow in the crowd, and he watched her move through the nobles. She was approached easily, and treated with respect, far more so than Trian had been earlier.

He felt a bit of shock when he heard her speak in favor of restoring surface dwarves to their rights, especially given that her father had moments earlier spoken on the importance of tradition. Dutiful she may be, she had a mind of her own. Perhaps an alliance with Orzammar's newest commander wasn't a bad idea at all.

#

Saitada strode to the living quarters, Gorim a few paces behind. She considered her impression of the Warden-Commander. Cautious perhaps, but impressive nonetheless. And rather pretty for a human. She caught sight of her brothers, and steeled herself.

Trian spotted her first. "So you are a commander now. In name, at least. Wait - - what's that you're wearing? That dagger." Outrage filled his voice.

"A gift, made for me by a loyal subject."

Trian practically snarled. "I told that man not to presume to bribe House Aeducan. If your favor is bought so cheaply, it is your own shame. You should be attending our father at today's feast, not gossiping with second-rate smiths!"

Saitada sighed. "Bhelen, how was your day?"

Her younger brother's smile never faltered. "Interesting. I would have been at the feast, but Trian had need of me..."

"The world does not stop and start with your meager achievements. Not even tonight. Now, do you have some purpose in bothering us?"

"Father wants you," Saitada said.

"Of course he does. We must discuss strategy before the upcoming battle. Bhelen, stay here and stoke the new commander's conceit if you like, but then get to bed."

Bhelen's smile dropped the moment Trian was out of sight. "I honestly don't know how you put up with him."

"He's not that bad." At least he didn't use to be that bad, she thought to herself.

"There was a time I would have agreed with you, but I've recently had to rethink my views on our brother."

She frowned. "You sound serious, Bhelen."

"Unfortunately, I am. Trian has begun to move against you. I never thought his much-proclaimed honor would allow him to actually act on his jealousy. Big sister, Trian is going to try to kill you."

"What?"

"I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't overheard him giving orders to his men. Trian's decided you're a threat to his taking the throne. Maybe he's right."

"How am I a threat to Trian?"

"He fears what you are becoming, in the eyes of the people and the Assembly. Trian's the named prince, but only the Assembly can proclaim a king. It would be unusual for the Assembly to ignore the king's choice, but it does happen."

"The founder of House Bemot became a Paragon and king in one move from the Assembly, and he was a commoner." Gorim said.

"That was an extraordinary case. But at least a half-dozen times, the Assembly has named a lesser family member - - or even someone from another house - - as king. Twice, it was a woman."

"Enough. I won't listen to this," Saitada said.

Bhelen laid a hand on her arm. "You can't turn a blind eye to this! Your life is in serious danger!"

Saitada jerked away. "I said I won't listen to this sort of talk!"

Bhelen threw up his hands. "You are as noble and stubborn as ever. After Trian kills you, I suppose I will be the heir. But that's not how I would wish it. Enjoy your command. I fear it will be short-lived." He stormed away.

Gorim set a hand on her shoulder. "Come, my lady. The hour grows late, and you need your rest."

Saitada unclenched her fist. "I may sleep with my sword tonight."

"And I will be right outside the door. May the Paragons smile down on us."

#

The invitation came promptly the next morning, and Duncan found himself being given a tour of house Aeducan's armory. Saitada's second, Gorim trailed a few steps behind them. After a few minutes, Saitada led Duncan to an unused portion of the armory, away from the din of the smiths. Clearly, the position was meant to provide some privacy.

"Tell me, Duncan, what do you know of the casteless?"

"That Orzammar believes they are tainted by the sins of their ancestors, and..."

"So polite. You won't offend me with plain speech. They are treated like dirt and denied any chance at decent work, so

many turn to crime just to survive. We treat nugs better." She looked back out at the armory. "I've heard there are some casteless that, in spite of being forbidden to take arms, have proved themselves capable and cunning warriors. I wonder, perhaps, if they may be what you are looking for."

"Something tells me you have more in mind." Duncan found himself intrigued by the direction the princess was taking.

"Some casteless serve with distinction in the Legion of the Dead, but the Legion does not speak of individual prowess. Casteless Grey Wardens, on the other hand, could make names for themselves, and serve to prove that they are more than we allow them to be." She gazed up at Duncan. "You get recruits familiar with the deep roads, who know darkspawn sign and lore. I get a chance to improve the lot of all casteless. What say you?"

"Have you particular individuals in mind?"

"I'm chasing a few rumors. The problem is getting them and you in the same place at the same time. The guards are eager to impress you, and so clear the casteless out when they see you coming. You are staying a few days?"

"Yes. We need to know how many darkspawn may be pushing towards the surface."

"Difficult for you to get that close. I may be able to assist there as well. Perhaps a strike by the dwarven military to distract them so your people can get what they need?"

Duncan's eyes widened slightly. "Such a thing would be more than I dared ask your father. We would be most grateful."

Saitada smiled. "I wish we could do more, but we haven't numbers enough. Come; let me show you what our smiths have been working on. We've found new ways of making weapons more potent against the darkspawn."

#

"Astrast Vala, big brother."

Trian glanced up from where he was examining a shield. His face softened when he saw her. "Astrast Vala, sister. Was there something you needed?"

Saitada tossed a small package onto the table. "At the market I noticed Lady Jaylia sighing over this scarf, but her sister distracted her before she could make the purchase. I had Gorim go back for it later. I thought perhaps you could present it to her as a token."

Trian blinked. "I appreciate your forethought in the matter."

"House Helmi produces fine warriors, and I find I'm fond of Lady Jaylia." Saitada smiled.

"It will make for a strong alliance," he said. He glanced down at the shield, then back at her. "I was rude to you yesterday. You did not deserve it."

Saitada smiled. It was the closest Trian would ever come to

an apology. "I assume something is troubling you. Anything I can do?"

"It is ghosts and shadows for now." She saw a few of those ghosts and shadows cross his face. Her brother had not been sleeping well of late. She knew as well as he did that their father was a lot more ill than he let on. Already, the crown weighed heavily on Trian's brow. She did not envy him it's weight.

She sat on the edge of the table. She set a hand on his shoulder for a moment, then sighed. "If we get ten minutes to breathe anytime soon, we should do a stalker run. I think I can take you."

He actually managed a smile. "Little sister, the day has not yet come when you could best me."

"I'm not so sure. I have learned the art from the best, you know."

He patted her leg. "I wish I did have the time. It's been too long since we..." he sighed. "I may not have time for a stalker run, but perhaps a game of stones later?"

"Looking forward to it." She tilted her head to one side. "Did you get a chance to speak with the Grey Warden?"

"I fear he wants more than Orzammar is strong enough to provide. Perhaps a Blight will remind those surfacers of what Orzammar deals with every day."

Saitada nodded. "If the darkspawn are moving towards the surface, perhaps we could use the Gray Wardens' presence here to do some judicious scouting. There may be the opportunity to lay the groundwork to reclaim territory."

"The risk would be great."

"True. But on the other hand, you could be the first Aeducan in generations to actually control Aeducan Thaig."

Trian frowned thoughtfully. "A notion worth considering. Have you discussed this with father?"

"I thought it better coming from you."

"Good." As Saitada started to walk away, he spoke again. "About the dagger..."

"I gave it to Gorim."

"Wise. Dedication such as his should be rewarded."

"I could not agree more."

He hesitated. "There is another matter I wished to discuss with you. I know Harrowmont has been trying to convince you towards a match." Trian set down the shield and gave her an appraising look. "I wish you to consider his nephew, Renvil. House Harrowmont has been ever loyal, and the match would cement ties between our houses. And Renvil seems like a fine young man."

Saitada nodded. "I will consider him. He is certainly a more palatable option than Lord Edir Meino."

Trian bristled. "House Meino oversteps itself. I am dining with Valin tomorrow. I will instruct him to have a word with his brother before I do."

"Partha, brother."

"Edir is unworthy of you."

"Edir barely qualifies as annoying, let alone offensive." She made a placating gesture. "Was there anything else?"

"That will be all."

"Atrast tunsha"

#

Gorim raised an eyebrow at Saitada before falling into step beside her. "Well?"

"Bhelen's wrong. Trian's planning a marriage for me, not a grave."

"It could be a way to have you let down your guard."

"Trian is many things, Gorim. Subtle is not one of them."

"I see your point. Are you going to go along with his plans?"

Saitada sighed. "He could have chosen worse." She sighed. "He chose Lord Renvil Harrowmont."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I would consider him. What should I have told him? That I already have all the man I need?" She waggled her eyebrows at him, and he snorted.

"Why not? I'll just wear a sign that says, "Assassinate me, before Lady Aeducan marries beneath her." They looked at each other, then laughed. "I like Renvil," he said. "His men hold him in genuinely high regard."

"Good to know. I'm not unopposed, just..." she sighed. "Not ready to settle down." She shrugged. "He was receptive to the thought of the feint into the Deep Roads. By tomorrow, he'll present it to father and forget completely that it wasn't his idea."

Gorim frowned. "You plan to let him take the credit?"

"I don't care who gets the credit, as long as the job gets done. Who knows, perhaps becoming king will calm Trian."

"We can only hope. Perhaps we should get going?"

"Edir Meino has been trying to court me again."

"He's a fool."

"It isn't Edir who concerns me. It's his brother, Valin." She

folded her arms. "Edir's flirtation is harmless, and he knows it as well as I. Valin, however, seems to think he has an actual chance."

"Does he think your father or Trian would ever agree to such a match?"

"I think I'll run off and join the wardens before I let that happen." She shook her head. "Gorim, if anyone knocks on my door, I have left you with strict orders to execute anyone who disrupts my sleep."

"You are sneaking out of the palace again."

"Who, me?"

"You could let Trian fight off his own assassins."

"If they came at him with blades, I've no doubt that he would. Which is why they will come at him with poison."

Gorim ran a hand through his hair. "You could at least let me come with you."

"What, and have them all think we ran off to canoodle?" She shook her head. "Then I'd be fighting off the assassins coming for you." She gave him a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine."

#

Saitada ran a hand through her hair. The potion darkened it to a mousy brown. Dressing in servant's clothes and carrying a

bundle of laundry enabled her to walk almost anywhere without being given a second look. She saw a merchant give Valin the bottle, and smiled. Antivan brandy. Valin certainly knew her brother's weak spots.

She returned to the palace, and washed the dye from her hair.

The next morning, she was waiting to fall into step with Valin as he entered the palace. She gave him a flirtatious smile. "Good morning Valin. How is your brother?"

Valin's eyes looked her over with quiet satisfaction. "He is well, your highness."

"If you have a moment, I'd like to discuss a small matter with you." She gave him a coy look, and walked into the library. He followed, as she knew he would. "Close the door?"

He did so, then turned towards her with a smile. And stopped short as the point of her blade touched his chest. "Your highness?"

"You have a bottle of Antivan brandy." She flicked her eyes to the bottle he was dangling by its neck.

His eyes widened just slightly. "Yes. A gift, for your brother. He has..."

"Pour a glass," she said, tilting her head towards the cups she'd left on the table earlier.

"Your highness, I..."

"Pour."

He swallowed, then obeyed. "Your highness..."

"Drink."

"I..." he shook his head. "My lady, this was a gift for your brother. I intended..."

"I am aware of your intentions, Valin. Drink."

"I..."

"Come now, Valin. A drink of fine Antivan brandy, or a sword through your gut. One would think it would be an easy decision." There was nothing warm about her smile.

His face was pale. He looked down at the sword, then back up to her face. He swallowed. "How did you know?"

"You told me. Just now."

He nodded. "I'm sorry, my lady."

"A name, Valin."

"Beraht."

"Drink, Valin. And this will remain between you and I."

"Thank you, my lady." He took the cup, and sat at the table.
"My brother... he had nothing to do with this."

"I know."

He nodded. Then drank. The cup slipped from his fingers as slumped to lay face down on the table. She sheathed her sword, then walked away.

#

She jumped when Trian flung open the door to her room. He looked around, and she saw relief fill his eyes when he saw her scribbling at her desk. "You are alright? You didn't drink any, did you?"

Saitada blinked, then gave him a confused look. "Drink any?"

He came around the desk and pulled her to her feet, peering into her eyes. "Lord Valin. You spoke with him?"

"Yes. Half an hour ago," Saitada frowned. "What's wrong?"

"He invited you to share a drink with him?"

Saitada nodded. "He did. Antivan brandy. I declined. I did not wish to give him notions, especially after our conversation yesterday."

Trian sagged in relief. "The brandy was poisoned."

Saitada put a hand over her mouth. "But... wasn't he

supposed to be taking lunch with you? Brother, I ran into him only by chance." She watched realization enter his eyes.

"It was meant for me," he said. She laid a hand on his arm, then drew him into a hug. He rested his head on her shoulder for a moment. He drew back, then looked at her. "A good man is dead. You could easily have been killed as well. When I find who is responsible..."

Saitada tapped her mouth. "He said..." She furrowed her brow. "What was the name? When he was inviting me to join him for the drink, he said... Barat?" She shook her head. "I was in a hurry to get away. Beraht maybe. Beraht had given him a good deal on the bottle."

"Beraht," Trian said. "I will have my men look into this." He gave her a tired smile. "I did not congratulate you on winning your fourth proving."

"I am catching up to you, brother."

"Humph," he said, a trace of a smile on his lips. "Perhaps I managed to thump some skill into that hard head of yours."

She returned the smile, then sighed. "Lord Edir is going to be sorely grieved. We should do something for the family. Edir is young, but he has a good head for tactics. You could take him under your wing."

Trian's lips twitched, but even that ghost of a smile warmed his eyes. "A good thought, sister. It may have been chance,

but his brother gave his life for me. I will offer Edir a commission among my men." He sighed. "Have you thought about what we spoke of the other day?"

"Yes."

"I would prefer a match that made you happy," he said softly.

"Renvil will be returning in a few days. Perhaps I will invite him to sit with me at a proving. You and Lady Jaylia could join us as well. I may like her, but I'm not entirely convinced she's good enough for my brother." She winked at Trian.

"Make the arrangements." Trian started to walk away, then turned back. "Jaylia would... should I get her something?"

"I will make that arrangement as well."

He nodded, then left the room. She smiled, then looked up at Gorim entered, closing the door behind him. "I dropped the name."

"Think he'll find anything?"

"Trian?" Saitada shook her head. "No. But he'll say something to Faren, and you know Faren. You may have to actually give him the scent, but he'll follow it all the way to Rivain." She glanced down at her desk. "Oh, could you do me a small favor?"

"Of course."

"Would you make an inquiry of your serving girl? I need to pick up a token for Trian to give Lady Jaylia."

Gorim shook his head and laughed. "You know, at some point, Trian is going to need to do his own courting."

"And may the stone catch us when we fall."

3. Chapter 3

Kevan touched the hilt of his blade and pondered, not for the first time, how best to stick Beraht. Single thrust up under the rib cage? Stab through the neck then slash open through the front? Base of the skull? At least Beraht wasn't laying hands on Rica. Words were just words. Still, nobody had the right to talk to his sister like that.

"I can't keep gambling on you forever, precious. You got a sweet look, something to light a man on fire. But you got to make it count." Beraht brushed the back of his hand over Rica's chest.

Rica stepped backwards. "Please, Beraht. Can we not do this in front of my brother-"

Beraht gave Kevan a leering look. "Why not? He knows the slope of the land, don't you boy?"

Kevan was unsuccessful in biting back the angry reply. "Didn't I tell you not to talk that way to my sister?"

Beraht smirked. "You've told me a lot of things, not one of which meant more than a fart in the middens. Before me, your sister was just another duster. Now check her out. Braids down to here, gold-capped teeth. She can recite elf-poetry

and play the string-harp. Every man's dream. All she's gotta do is find a lord, squeeze out some kid who looks like him, and we're all living the easy life in the Diamond Quarter."

Rica put a hand on Kevan's arm and whispered, "please don't get involved. You know that never goes well."

"I don't like to see him treating you that way," Kevan replied.

He didn't quite keep his voice low enough. Beraht stared at him. "I'll treat her however I like, as long as you both eat off my plate. You keep your head down and say "Aye" to any job I decide is low enough for scum like you. In return, I put out coin so you can doll yourself up and get a bellyful of some nobleman's brat. Then you both go free. And I get to join the family and be called, 'my lord' for the rest of the little prince's life."

Kevan kept his fists unclenched through sheer force of will. "And her son will call you uncle and come visit on name-days?"

Beraht laughed. "That's what everyone likes - - a casteless with a big mouth. But I didn't come for the joy of your company. I've been looking at my investments, and this one hasn't borne much gold. I'm giving you another week, precious. If you haven't found a patron, you're back to sweeping streets."

Rica spoke up, stepping between her brother and Beraht. "But...I have. I've met someone... That is, I didn't want to

promise, but he seemed interested."

Kevan looked at Beraht over Rica's head. "So get off her back and tell me my job for today."

"Your buddy Leske's waiting outside. He knows what I'll need from you today. Don't even think about bungling this job. Your whole family's on loose sand with me right now. And I know you don't have anywhere else to turn." Beraht turned and stormed out of the shack, slamming the door behind him.

#

Rica picked up a cloth, then set it down before picking it up again and fidgeting with it nervously. "I'm sorry you had to see that."

Kevan moved up to stand next to her, and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "You don't have to hide anything from me, Rica."

She leaned into him. "I know. You've always been a good brother, always tried to protect me. Sigh, I should have told you. Beraht's been warning me ever since two of his other girls found patrons at Lord Harrowmont's reception. They've been getting gifts already. Lord Rousten gave Elsy a surface-silk gown and she's not even pregnant. Beraht's getting impatient."

Kevan held her for a moment. "I just wish we didn't have to kiss up to that cave tick."

"You know the other options. Cleaning middens... begging... going to the surface. No, unless you find a way to save us all from darkspawn and become a Paragon, we're pretty much on Beraht's leash for life." She straightened up, then pulled the overdress on over her head.

"Beraht expects too much from you." Kevan stepped up to help her adjust the garment, straightening the back.

"You know how desperate the nobles are for more children. They can barely field enough soldiers to hold the walls against the darkspawn. If I could give one of them a son, the whole house would celebrate. And we'd all be raised up to the noble caste to join the family." She sighed. "It's what Beraht's betting on. That's why he paid for my clothes, my voice lessons. He wants to share the reward."

"Did you say there was a noble who was interested?"

"Yes. That is, I hope. He certainly seems... charming. He treats me like a real lady, not just someone to tumble and forget."

Kevan's smile was genuine. "Who is he?"

"I-I don't want to say... in case I'm wrong. It just seems too mad to think of one of the most important men in Orzammar with... someone like me. Anyway, time is rusting, and I need to get dressed. These fashions will be the death of me - - a hundred buttons on each sleeve!" She sighed again. "and Leske's probably already outside waiting for you."

"You're right." He pinched her nose playfully. "Goodbye."

She smacked him with the cloth. "Stay out of trouble. I'll see you tonight."

#

Kevan walked into the next room and sighed. His mother was face down on the table again. He shook his head and went to move the dishes off the table so she didn't knock them to the floor again.

"Whozzat? Why are you bothering me? Rica?"

"No, Mother. It's Kevan. Your son?" He couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice.

"Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot! You think I don't know my own kid? What're you doing here, anyway? Rica said you were finally making something useful of yourself." She stared up at him, the remains of her breakfast crusted into her face and hair.

"You have to stop this, Mother. You're killing yourself."

"You tell me, just what do I got that's worth living for?"

"What about me? What about Rica?"

"I know you both hate me. I-I know what I done to you, but... It was for your own good. The world's a cruel place. You... you had to learn that. You think you'd be where you are now if

I'd let you hide from a few slaps? Everything you are, I made you!" She slammed her fist weakly into the table.

Kevan shook his head. "I've got work to do. Try to dry out by the time I get home."

"Oh, I shouldn't keep doing this to you. I know I shouldn't. It's just so hard... Hey, where's he going? Why's he leaving? Don't leave me!" She started to weep.

Rica came into the room and began guiding her to the pallet. "Never mind, Mother. Why don't you just lie down? That's good."

Kevan watched her settle their mother into the bed. The old woman was snoring before she was all the way down. "Mother seems worse today."

Rica stood. "She comes and goes. I think the moss-wine's finally rotted her brain."

"Watch out for her. I don't want her to hurt herself."

"She's hurting no matter what we do, brother. And you wonder why I keep telling you to find a way out of this gutter?" She punched him lightly in the shoulder. "So get moving, unless you know how to do a double-cross lace on the back of this thing." She gave him a threatening look.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "All right. I'm going. Goodbye."

#

Leske was leaning against a broken hovel when Brosca exited the house. "About sodding time. I was starting to think I'd have to bust in there and get an eyeful of that spicy sister of yours. Ga-row!"

Kevan patted his dagger. "Haven't I told you never to talk about my sister that way?"

Leske grinned broadly, wagging his eyebrows. "But no hot-blooded dwarf can help himself. Those perfect lips, just made to be screaming my name. You must have had a few naughty thoughts yourself, huh? What do you say?"

"That I might have to feed you your spleen."

"At least I'd have something to eat." Leske shrugged. "But much as I'd love to keep chatting, we'd better get down to business."

Kevan made a disappointed sound. "I was hoping our mission was me making fun of you."

Leske patted his shoulder sympathetically. "No such luck. Boss says we're out for a search and discipline. One of his smugglers is holding out on him. Name's Oskias. Some surfacer. Beraht got word that he's been selling shipments topside that never make it to Beraht's ears down here. He wants us to find the rotter and see what goods he's holding back."

"He's stealing from Beraht? I like him already." He fell into step next to Leske.

"Well, yours will be a short and tragic relationship. You ready to show him some pain?"

"I don't think it's right to just kill this guy."

"We're not just killing him. First, we take back anything he stole and then we kill him. Come on. You can feel bad later."

"Fine. But at least find out what he's done."

"Whatever lets you sleep at night, my friend."

#

Kevan entered the tavern, then looked around. Leske nodded at where the merchant was sitting, and he headed in that direction. Almost lazily, he took the seat across from Oskias.

"Hey, I was saving that seat!"

Leske moved to stand at Kevan's shoulder. "That's real thoughtful, Oskias. It's tiring work looking for you."

Oskias gulped. "H-how do you know my name?"

Kevan showed just a hint of teeth. "Did you think Beraht wouldn't find out you're cheating him?"

"Look, I-I always been loyal to Beraht." Oskias held up his

hands. "He's been good to my family; I-I know how much I owe him."

"Save your excuses. Leske, search his bags."

"My pleasure." Leske started to step around the table.

"W-wait! I do have some lyrium. It's just ore. I-I made a side deal with one of the mining families. If it worked out, I was gonna bring Beraht his cut, I swear. I-I'd be crazy not to."

Leske and Kevan exchanged a look. "Suicidal, one might say," Leske said.

"How much ore did you take?"

"Just a little. Maybe twenty-five sovereigns worth -"

Leske's mouth opened. "Twenty-five sovereigns?"

Oskias held up a hand. "Most of that's with my buyers on the surface. I just picked up a few nuggets down here. If I were to... maybe give you a piece, that's a lot of coin. Could you, uh, forget to mention this to Beraht?"

Kevan exchanged another look with Leske. "I'm listening..." Kevan said.

"I-I don't got any coin myself. I make that topside. But you can take the ore, sell it, maybe get enough to get out of this nest? What do you say?"

"Give me all you have, and I'll pretend you weren't here."
Kevan said.

"All I have is the two nuggets, but they're yours if you let me out of here."

Leske shook his head at Kevan. "Are you breathing smoke? Beraht'll kill you if he catches you with his lyrium!"

"Me? You think I wouldn't share with my best friend?" Kevan gave him a knowing wink.

A slow smile spread across Leske's face. "Well, that's a whole other story. We'd need to sell it before we go back to Beraht. And to someone who won't run to him. Tell you what - cut me in fifty, and we'll take it to Olinda. Remember her? She likes me and refuses to work with the old man."

"Deal"

Oskias looked from one to the other. "Then what happens to me?"

"I'm killing you..." Kevan saw Oskias's face go pale behind his beard. "As far as Beraht knows. Got it?"

"Yes. Yes! I'll go back up to the surface right now. I'll move to Orlais, to Antiva! Thank you! You're as noble as you are strong! May the ancestors bless your steps!" He fumbled a small pouch out of his bag as they lead him out of the building. He handed it to Kevan, hands still shaking, before he turned

and fled.

#

The two shoved each other back and forth playfully as they walked back into the commons. Leske led them straight to Olinda's booth. "Leske! You old scamp, what're you doing here? Trying to charm me out of another set of ribbons for your girl?"

Leske gave her a charming smile. "Trying to talk you into being my girl, Olinda. You know my heart's breaking for you."

"Don't you go saying that around my husband." She laughed as she shook her head at the man nearly young enough to be her son. "How have you been?"

Kevan stepped up. "We've got some Lyrium to sell you."

"Well... that's not what I was expecting to hear cross those lips. Where exactly would someone like you pick up lyrium?"

"Where do you think?" Kevan gave her a wink.

"I think..." She shrugged. "That's probably something I should never know."

Leske elbowed him. "Didn't I tell you she's a gem!"

"How much do you have?"

"Two nuggets."

"I can give you thirty silvers per nugget"

"Only thirty..." Disappointment filled Leske's voice.

"It's less than it's worth, I won't lie to you, but the market for its topside and that won't be easy for me to reach. And I'll have to find a buyer who won't ask where it came from. For that, I can't afford more than thirty."

"I'll sell you two nuggets," Brosca said. "For thirty each, and this," he said, picking up a bottle of moss wine.

"All right, then. Let me take that off your hands. And you probably shouldn't come around here for a while... just in case."

Kevan handed Leske his share of the coins as they headed in to report to Beraht. "Try not to blow it all on drinks."

"Maybe drinks and a bit of slightly less masculine companionship." Leske waggled his eyebrows. "I mean, you're pretty and all, but..."

"I forget, why am I not stabbing you right now?"

4. Chapter 4

"Good Morning, Duncan. Father has asked me to accompany you to the Proving."

"I appreciate that."

"I think he hopes if she's escorting you, she won't sneak off and win this one," Gorim said.

Duncan laughed.

Saitada punched Gorim lightly on the arm. "It's understood that the winner will be presented to the Grey Wardens. We actually have a fairly impressive turnout. Mainar appears to be the favorite to win. He's a veteran of four campaigns against the darkspawn. Not much of a commander, but a good man to have at your back."

"He's your recommendation?"

Saitada hesitated, and Duncan nodded in understanding. "I don't mean to do him a disservice, but the man hasn't had an original thought in a decade. Still, he can thump skulls with the best." She shrugged. "There are a couple others I may point out to you, if they show up."

"I appreciate that," he said, falling into step behind her. Gorim

trailed along a few steps behind, leaving them to converse privately. He found the princess remarkably easy to talk to, and to his surprise found himself regaling her with a tale from his rather misspent youth. Her laughter was warm and friendly, and he found himself more at ease with her than he had been any save his fellow wardens in more years than he cared to consider.

She introduced him to the proving trainer, praising the man generously enough that he nearly fell over himself giving Duncan details on the various competitors. Duncan made a few mental notes, more in an attempt to keep his thoughts from wandering to the princess than any real effort at considering recruits.

After the fighters were announced, Saitada glanced around. "Would you like to mingle a bit, before the fighting starts?"

Duncan raised an eyebrow, "You aren't going to?"

Saitada sighed. "My presence will make them nervous. Or get certain ones thinking I came to watch them," she muttered almost under her breath before looking back up at him. "Either outcome is something I wish to avoid. Gorim and I will be in the balcony when you are ready to join us. Waiting patiently. Not hiding from Darvianak Vollney at all."

"Thank you, Lady Aeducan." He gave her a half bow, and watched her walk away. A dwarf. A princess. Half his age. He shook his head. And a blight on it's way. He had better things to do than consider certain notions.

#

Kevan ducked his head as he entered the shop. Beraht's goods were widely varied, and he wondered how many of the goods were stolen or otherwise unethically acquired. Beraht was engaged in conversation with a casteless woman he recognized as Jarvia. He felt a tiny chill. Beraht, at least, killed quickly.

"The king is old. His rule won't hold much longer," Beraht was saying.

"Prince Bhelen seems far more sympathetic to our interests than Trian," Jarvia said, tapping her fingers thoughtfully against her sword. Kevan felt his blood chill further. Even just being around such talk was dangerous.

Beraht gave the smug smirk that made Kevan want to stick a knife in his gut. "Bhelen has some tastes of his own that he knows I can provide-" He stopped talking as he caught sight of Kevan and Leske. "We'll finish this later. It's about time you two showed up. What happened with Oskias?"

Kevan shrugged and walked towards him casually. "He didn't have any lyrium or gold on him."

Beraht shook his head. "What kind of rot are you trying to feed me?"

"He told us he'd been putting together a side deal for lyrium, but he'd already sold it." Leske tried to mimic Kevan's casual

stance and tone.

"Jarvia! Send a dig-troop topside. If Oskias had a hiding spot up there, I want us up to our elbows in it."

"As you say!" The woman had a strange gleam in her eyes as she looked at them. Kevan began to feel something like a nug caught in a trap.

"And the matter of... punishment?" Beraht asked. There was something in his tone.

"Don't worry. I killed him myself."

"Very interesting, seeing how my cousin was a the Tapsters this afternoon. And he says he saw something change hands between you and Oskias and then the duster sodding stood up and walked out on his own two feet! Does that sound like what I asked? Jarvia, what does that sound like to you?" Beraht folded his arms.

"Sounds like some jumped up face-brands thought they could take a bribe and let him walk free. That's just not right." She ran her eyes up and down Kevan, and licked her lips slightly. Yep, nug in a trap summed it up fairly well.

"The lady says it's not right. You wouldn't disagree with a lady, would you?"

"I'm not stupid enough to kill Oskias in public!" Kevan said, injecting an offended note into his voice. He shook his head.

Leske glanced at him. "Right. I mean, no one's gonna say spit to you, Beraht, but we can't move that free. We needed to get Oskias somewhere private. We took him to the lava sinks behind the mines. You won't be seeing him again."

Beraht narrowed his eyes. "Hmm... I don't like you making me look weak... but it's smart to keep the Sword Castes from asking questions." Suddenly he smiled. "That's why I like you two. Now, I got something else for you. Make some use of your... unique skills."

Brosca gave an unconcerned shrug, ignoring his heart pounding in his ears. "Do I get to make some other duster cry?"

"Not if you know what's healthy for you." Beraht's voice was sharp. "This one I want you to be invisible. The Warrior Caste is hosting a Proving today - all the best fighters, last man standing - you know the sort of thing. They're showing off for some Grey Warden who's looking for candidates to drag off to a life of eternal glory. Now, it's not often we get every name fighter in Orzammar lined up like that, and I have certain acquaintances who... take an interest in this sort of thing."

"You're taking bets on the fighters?" Kevan began running through his mental list of people who would pay a few coppers for a good tip.

"There's a lot of coin to be made when people get the fever up. Favored fighter's an officer named Mainar, veteran of four darkspawn campaigns. Everd's a long-shot. Just got back

from the Deep Roads offensive. Some young buck who has all the ladies drooling. I've a lot of money riding on him. Mine and other people's. I expect to see that eight-to-one pay off. Understand?"

"So how am I supposed to help Everd win?" Kevan asked. He wondered if he dared bet his newly acquired silver. That kind of pay-off meant gold.

"They fight only gets announced to contestants themselves... to prevent illegal gambling. So first, you'll have to find Everd, see who he's fighting, and when. When the name Mainar comes up, I want you to slip this drug into the bastard's water. It'll slow his reflexes, just enough to take the edge off, not enough to show. But it wears off quickly, so don't use it until just before his fight."

"All right. We'll go now."

"You bet you will. Here's your pass to get into the grounds. The Proving starts as soon as the clock strikes. And when I say I have coin on this, I'm not talking about some pittance, like the value of your life. If I don't see Everd's name on the winner's sheet, you better make sure I never see you, or your sister, ever again." Kevan had to force his fists not to clench when Beraht mentioned Rica.

#

"Alright, which bookie are we visiting?" Leske asked as soon as they were out of Beraht's shop.

Kevan grinned. "One that doesn't work for Beraht. I'm betting twenty. You?"

"I'm betting it all. Gold, Kevan. We could buy our way in, instead of just getting stuck with Carta make-work." Even speaking in a whisper couldn't keep the excitement out of Leske's voice.

"Darvin will be at the arena. He'll take his cut, but he won't report us to Beraht," Kevan said. He strode across the arena bridge. "Maybe we'll actually have a chance to watch a few of the matches."

"Wish I could have watched the gloring proving. Adal Helmi going toe to toe with Saitada Aeducan. Pisk hasn't shut up about it. You'd think they'd been mud wrestling stark nekkid, the way he tells it."

Kevan stumbled a bit as the image popped into his head, then he laughed. He coughed, then approached the guard on the arena door. The guard sneered. "Turn around, brand. No casteless on the grounds."

"But I have a pass right here." Kevan waved the document Beraht had given him.

The guard all but snatched it out of his hand. "Hrmmmm... Looks legitimate." He glared at Kevan. "Go on through, then. But stay to the trenches. Grey Wardens don't need some eyesore getting between them and the fighters." He shoved the pass back at them before moving aside to let them enter.

Kevan felt a small tinge of relief as they entered. He walked into the main hall, Leske a step behind. He was attempting to figure out where Darvin might be when Leske elbowed him. "Stone's embrace! That's one of them. One of the Grey Wardens." Kevan turned his gaze in the direction Leske was pointing. The lone human was fairly easy to pick out of the crowd. "I dare you to go over and talk to him. Say, 'Welcome to Orzammar, Warden ser. May I drink your bath water?'"

He chuckled, then winked at Leske before heading in the warden's direction. Leske started frantically shaking his head, and Kevan just smiled.

#

Duncan was walking through the arena commons when two dwarves in particular caught his eye. They had marks on their faces, and were getting strange looks from some of the others present. One had dark hair styled into several braids and had only stubble. The other wore his blond hair tied back, and his beard and mustache sported rather intricate braids. The dark haired one caught sight of him, and elbowed his companion. They exchanged a couple words, and then the blond walked over to him.

He smiled and crossed his wrists to give a formal bow. ""Stone-met and blessings on your house." He noted the dwarf's surprised look. "That was the proper greeting for an outsider last time I visited Orzammar. Has it changed? Or is there a reason you're looking at me so strangely?"

"In my part of Orzammar, we just go with, 'Hello'," the dwarf said.

"We do the same in my part of Ferelden. Hello then. My name is Duncan. I'd say, "of the Grey Wardens," but I suspect you already know that. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm Kevan." Kevan hesitated. "Of... nobody."

"Ah... of course. That's what the face-brand means, then." Duncan mentally kicked at himself. Saitada had told him just that not even an hour before. "I remember that now."

"Is it true you're here looking for recruits?"

"The Wardens are always looking for those who have the courage to spend their lives in battle against the darkspawn." He gave the young man an appraising look, and realized that he matched one of the descriptions Saitada had given him earlier. It took a small act of will to keep his face straight. "It's rare we find both those with the skill and the will. The best Wardens are ruthless to their enemies, compassionate to their friends, and inspiring to their troops. It's a lot to look for, but I hope to find it here." He noted the other dwarf waving to get Kevan's attention. "And I hope you may find what you are looking for."

#

Leske just shook his head. "Duster, you are insane."

"You knew the moment you said 'I dare you', I was going to go talk to him," Kevan replied.

Leske grinned. "I dare you to let me date your sister."

"What's that, you want me to push you into the lava?" Kevan asked. "Let's do what we came here to do, and then get lost."

"Right. Everd is this way." Leske led him towards the fighter's quarters. "Let's find out when he's fighting." He started to knock, and the door swung open.

Everd was laying on the floor. Kevan started to step forward, assuming foul play, when the gladiator let out a loud snore. Leske let out a string of curses. "Sod it! He's stone drunk! He could draw a dead man for his bout and still lose." He shook his head. "Beraht's going to kill us if we slip up here. He's already jumpy enough after that stunt with Oskias -"

Kevan ignored Leske as the man continued to babble in panic. He shook Everd, but the man didn't respond. He was considering dumping the basin of water over the man's head when Leske grabbed his shoulder. "Hey, I just had an idea..."

"Do I want to hear this?" Kevan asked. Maybe he could get his hands on a healing potion of some kind.

"So, you've been rubbing my nose in how you're the meanest thing with a blade, right?" Leske spoke fast, waving his hands in his excitement. He pointed. "Everd's armor is over there and you're about the same size..."

A slow smile spread across Kevan's face. He nodded, then looked at Leske. "If I do this I'll win by skill alone. I won't use the drug."

Leske's eyes widened. "You've got a heart of steel, salroka. Get in the armor."

He had to shove Leske's hands away as the man tried to help and nearly buckled the greaves on wrong. The helmet was all that was left when he heard Everd's name called. "Time to go. Place the bets," he said, shoving his coinpurse into Leske's hand before rushing off.

The arena master only gave him the barest nod before letting him onto the field.

#

Duncan's eyes fell on Saitada the moment he entered the viewing stand. She smiled, then patted the seat next to her, and he moved to join her. She gestured at a servant, and a moment later, Duncan was being offered a cool drink. He accepted it gratefully.

"You look thoughtful," she said.

He tore his thoughts away from the direction they'd been headed, and took a sip from the drink before replying. "I just met a young casteless that matched a description you gave me earlier."

She laughed. "First time I let you walk around on your own, and you find the guy for whom I've been searching three days." She shook her head. "And?"

"He approached me. Even asked about recruits."

She leaned towards him, eyes bright. "And?"

"I gave him the speech. With luck, he will seek me out again." He smiled at her, then tore his eyes away from her pale green ones and looked out at the fighting ground. "If he does, perhaps I will leave Orzammar with two recruits."

Saitada shot a glance over her other shoulder. "If Harrowmont doesn't stop with the matchmaking, you may just leave Orzammar with three."

He felt his heart pound, and told himself to stop being foolish. He kept his voice light. "Remind me to tell Harrowmont to keep up the good work."

She elbowed him playfully. "Hush you. It's starting."

#

Duncan smiled as he watched Everd down his first opponent. The man certainly was fast. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Saitada lean forward, her eyes narrowed. He turned towards her. She met his eyes. "That's not Everd," she said, careful to keep her voice quiet.

"What?" he asked, keeping his own voice low.

"I don't know who is wearing that armor, but it isn't Everd. He was under my command only a couple weeks ago. He is nowhere near that light-footed." She looked back to the fight.

Duncan watched the man take out his opponent easily. "Whoever it is, he is winning."

"I noticed," Saitada said contemplatively. She turned to look at Gorim. "Do me a favor. Make sure I've got a dozen or so of my men handy."

Gorim nodded and immediately left. Duncan looked back at her. "Lady Aeducan?"

"If this gets ugly, I want to keep the peace."

"I see."

The dwarf had just finished his last fight when a wobbly dwarf walked out into the arena. Beside him, Saitada let out a small hiss. Duncan raised an eyebrow. "I take it that is Everd?"

"It is indeed."

Below them, Everd stumbled towards the center of the ring. "Wha-? Is it my bout a'ready? Hey! That's my armor!"

The Proving Master starred, a dumbfounded expression on his face. "Who are you? How dare you disrupt this sacred -"

Mainar pushed the healer away from him. "Wait! I know that man. That's Everd!" He turned slowly to the armored man.

"Then... what imposter did I fight?"

The proving master stepped up to the podium, his voice ringing loud and clear. "Remove your helmet, warrior, and let all who watched you see your face."

The combatant unfastened the strap on the helm, then let it fall to the ground. Duncan shook his head as he recognized the blond dwarf that had spoken to him earlier. The man smiled up defiantly. "I am of no caste or clan, but I have defeated you all!" he shouted.

Beside him, Saitada was directing her men. They moved quickly down to the arena floor. Duncan watched as the proving master's face all but turned purple with rage. "Casteless! You insult the very nature of this Proving! Guards, take this... filth away!"

Duncan stood, hoping to buy time for Saitada's men to reach the man. "Hold your men, I pray you. This warrior has defeated the best you have to offer. Is that not what this proving is for?"

The proving master's jaw nearly unhinged. He swallowed and made a visible effort to control himself. "We are honored by your presence, Warden, but this proving is not solely for you. There are laws which have governed this arena for a thousand years. This man is no warrior! He is casteless, rejected by the ancestors. His very footsteps pollute the Stone. He has no place here."

Duncan looked down at the man standing proudly in the arena. He smiled. "Except as your champion..."

The proving master gave him a disgusted look. "Guards, take him."

Saitada stepped up to the podium and called out, "alive, if you please." The proving master started to protest, and one glare from the princess had the man stumbling backwards, hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"Now, see..." The proving master swallowed. "Lady Aeducan..."

Saitada gestured at her newly arrived guards as they entered the ring, and looked down at the man in the ring. "Alive, Master Corlin," she repeated. "I assure you, we will get to the bottom of this."

"Yes, of course, as you say, my Lady."

Duncan saw Kevan's face as the princess's men pushed past the other guards to take him into custody. Kevan looked up and met his eyes before letting the guards take him away. Duncan smiled, then looked to Saitada. She raised an eyebrow in response. "Well?"

He shook his head. "A bit impulsive, perhaps, but I can't question his skill. Or his..." Several words came to mind. He went with, "bravery. What happens now?" He fell into step beside her as she made her way out of the stands.

"They'll arrange a trial of some sort before the shapers. My father may oversee. I'll talk to him. He may prefer to let you handle this more... discreetly... and think of it as you doing us a favor."

"How long do you think?"

"A couple days, more or less. I'll head off the calls for blood."

"Thank you."

He heard her let out a delighted laugh. "Stone, did you see him? That's one for the stories." She hugged him, then threw up her hands. "He beat them all. In front of everyone. Stone, if he can manage half that performance for the wardens..."

Duncan shook his head and found himself smiling at her enthusiasm. She'd been beautiful before, but with that half wild, joyful smile on her face. It was a sight he'd take with him anywhere. "I suppose all that is left is for me to conscript him."

"Not all that's left. Stone, I almost forgot to tell you. I talked Trian into speaking with our father. The feast is being arranged for two days from now." She ran a hand through her crimson hair, then made herself calm down. "When you meet with the Ferelden king, have him send formal word. I'll start work on Trian and my father." She smiled. "With luck, we will fight at each other's side in the days to come, my friend."

"I look forward to it."

5. Chapter 5

Harl elbowed Duncan as a dwarven woman entered the warehouse the wardens were using as a camp. Duncan rose to greet her, then blinked as she drew back the hood to reveal crimson hair. "My Lady Aeducan, what brings you here?" Duncan smiled at the dwarven woman.

She touched a finger to her lips. "I'm not here, Duncan. And we aren't having this conversation." She beckoned him closer. "I was able to prevent the casteless from being summarily executed, but it seems someone else arranged for him to be removed from the prison."

Duncan sighed. "Some insulted noble, I assume?"

Lady Aeducan shook her head. "No, I fear he is back in the hands of the carta. It seems a particular idiot called Beraht may have been behind what occurred today. Which does, fortunately, provides us with a few more options. I gave quite the tongue-lashing to the guards who were supposed to be watching him, and made it clear if they don't want their princess to personally take an interest in making their lives miserable, they will find him and bring him back alive so a proper trial can be done. The guards are out looking now, but you may want to keep an ear out, perhaps offer your 'assistance'." She glanced over her shoulder. "If they were

just going to kill him, they'd have done it in the cell. If we act quickly, we may yet save him."

Duncan nodded. "I appreciate your help, Lady Aeducan."

She nodded, then handed Duncan a wrapped package. He glanced at her curiously. "I intended to present this to whoever won this morning's proving. I can no longer do so officially, of course, but..." she winked at Duncan. "It belonged to Foral Aeducan, an ancestor of mine who served as a Grey Warden."

He nodded and slipped the package into his satchel. "I'll see what we can find out."

She drew the hood back over her head. "I'll clear the way for you, as much as I can. Good luck." She left.

Duncan looked over at the other wardens. "You heard the lady."

Alistair shot him a smile, and Harl gave him a playful salute as they followed the other wardens out of the room. Duncan exited last, and headed towards the commons.

#

Kevan looked up at the ceiling. He was pretty sure it looked different than it had before he'd been knocked unconscious. He could hear something hissing. It took a few moments for him to realize it was Leske's voice. "Are you awake yet?"

Psssst... Can you hear me? How hard did they sodding hit you, anyway? Did you have to put up such a fight?"

"Leske? What happened?"

"As soon as everyone saw your face-brand, the place went mad. Shut all the doors, examined everyone for family and caste. One of the guards recognized me and figured we must be working together. They burned three candles to the stump interrogating me about who put us up to this. I think they knew, you know, about Beraht."

Kevan felt his blood go cold. "Beraht said he'd go for Rica if we're caught. We need to go."

"You think I didn't look for a way out? Rica's not the only one in danger here. They could kill us! But these cells are built straight into the wall, and they confiscated all my lock-picks. What's it look like on your side? You see any way out?"

Kevan started to look around just as the guard entered. He went to his knees, holding the back of his head, and coughed weakly. The guard gave him a concerned look, and Kevan let himself slump against the bars. He reached out and grabbed the guard as soon as he came into range, yanking the man into the bars with enough force to crack his skull. He heard Leske laugh as he grabbed the guard's keys. A few moments later, they were free and grabbing gear.

"If we want to get away with this, we can't leave one man alive to tell Beraht what we've done," Leske said.

"Where are we?"

"Carta hide out."

"Ah. Well. Okay. So, kill everyone isn't that bad a plan after all."

#

They'd killed almost a dozen men before they reached the main room of the hideout. He could hear Beraht's voice. "I'm cutting the whore free. If that turncoat brother of hers doesn't know his place, I don't need precious Rica either."

"Rica? That the one you got all done up in lace?" The thug leered. "I been wanting to get my hands on that." Kevan made a mental note of who to kill first.

"Heh, I know what you mean..." another man said, making a lewd gesture.

Beraht spread his hands in a gesture of generosity. "She's yours if you want her, boys. And let me tell you... it tastes as good as it looks." Beraht. He was definitely killing Beraht, Kevan thought to himself as the thugs began to laugh. Beraht looked up as they entered the room. "What in sod-all is that doing out of its cage? Let's teach this little duster a lesson."

Kevan's knife caught the first thug in the eye before the man could draw his blade. Leske moved in on the second thug as Kevan moved towards Beraht. Beraht stumbled backwards as

he drew his blade. He managed two wild swings before Kevan cut him down.

Behind him, he heard Leske give a joyful laugh. "Did you see him there, all, 'When we're done with you?' And you just charged in and sodding slaughtered him! You have to be the luckiest duster in Orzammar. Beraht's dead and we're standing here. Hail to the sodding king!"

Kevan cleaned his daggers on Beraht's vest. "As long as he never made it to Rica."

"Well, he was sure talking like she's still alive. But I won't turn down the chance to go take another peek. Hey, could you tell Rica I killed him? I mean, it doesn't do you any good if she thinks you're the most virile warrior in all the Stone..."

Kevan shot him a look, then turned his gaze down to the dagger he held. "Do you really want to say that when I'm holding a weapon?"

"An excellent point. Now let's go find somewhere to hide."

#

Duncan smiled as he approached the knot of guards outside of Beraht's store. It appeared the ruse would be unnecessary, as the casteless had somehow managed to free himself and his erstwhile companion. Still, it appeared the danger was not over, and he was about to be taken back into custody.

"There they are! Seize the fugitives!" a guard shouted.

The leader of the guards walked towards the two men that had emerged from the shop. "Drop your weapons and walk down slowly. We will use force if you resist."

"If this is your idea of a heroic rescue, you're too late," Kevan called out to the guards. He smirked.

"You do not speak until the shapers have judged you!"

Duncan stepped into the circle the guards had made around the two dwarves. "One moment, my friend. Did you not suggest this Beraht might have arranged their convenient escape?"

The leader of the guard glared at Duncan. "Regardless, the penalty for impersonating a higher caste is death."

Duncan remembered what Saitada had said. "If Beraht is as influential as you say, perhaps he also masterminded this Everd's impersonation."

He heard Kevan's amused voice. "Beraht won't be a problem anymore."

"He's dead?" The captain of the guard looked shocked, then quickly got himself under control. Duncan made a mental note to mention the man's reaction to the princess. "Beraht had many enemies, but also powerful allies. They-"

"Beraht would have butchered us if he hadn't killed him first!"

Leske said.

Duncan glanced down at Kevan. "Your friend has once again demonstrated his courage. We Grey Wardens travel far and wide in search of those with the potential to join our ranks. It seems I have found one."

"What are you saying?" Kevan gave him a confused look.

"That I have found what I sought in Orzammar. Let me make my offer formal. I, Duncan of the Grey Wardens, extend the invitation for you to join our order."

"This man is a criminal," the guard captain said, shaking his head. "You can't do this!"

"I can and I am," Duncan said before turning his attention back to the man beside him. "It would mean traveling to the surface lands and thus leaving your people, but it does offer you the chance to strike a blow against the darkspawn and the Blight."

"Then sodding yes, let's get out of here now." Kevan's face broke into a smile.

"Then before these witnesses, I hereby recruit you into the Grey Wardens. Know that you are most welcome."

"This is highly irregular. The warrior families will be..." The captain of the guard trailed off as the rest of the wardens began to gather, along with some of the princess's men. "...most upset." He shook his head, and the guards began to

wander off. Duncan noted with some amusement that they'd completely forgotten about the existence of the second casteless in their eagerness to be away.

"Look at you, you duster! A Warden! And to think I knew you when you were stealing bread!" the other casteless was saying.

Duncan reached into his satchel and removed the package Saitada had given him. He wished he could announce it as a gift from the princess, but thought it wiser not to at this point. "Before we brave the Deep Roads, I would like to make you a gift of this mace, since you have so few possessions of your own. It was once wielded by the Warden Foral Aeducan. I believe he was related to your king. I know you will continue his proud example." He stepped away to give his new recruit a few moments to speak to his friend, and noticed one of the princess's men was standing protectively behind a young casteless woman.

#

"From Dust Town to the Grey Wardens... You don't watch out, salroka, you'll end up a Paragon. And then I'll never hear the end of it," Leske said.

Kevan smiled at him, then looked to see Rica approaching. He gave Leske a look. "If you lay a finger on Rica, I'll be back with an army."

Leske shook his head. "Why do I think you mean that literally?"

"I'm going to miss you, duster. Now go. Before I make a fool of myself."

Rica threw her arms around him. "I can't believe you're really leaving. And as a Grey Warden! When Ser Duncan said he wanted to recruit you, I almost fell over. When I heard you were arrested, I rushed to the arena, but by then you were gone, and Ser Duncan and the princess were telling everyone they had to find you."

"Will it be safe for you if I leave?" Kevan whispered into her ear as he hugged her tightly.

Rica smiled up at him, her eyes bright with happiness. "This has been a lucky day for both of us. I spent the afternoon with my new patron. If everything works out... maybe I can even greet you as an equal if you return."

"This the man you spoke of earlier?"

"Yes." She let out a small, happy laugh. "He calls me his amber rose. Isn't that sweet? He has a voice like a poet. He already promised to move Mother and me into better lodging, where he can find me more quickly when he wants me."

"And you'll be happy like this?"

"I am. Truly. I could never make a life fighting darkspawn. But if I can bear a son who makes his house proud, that's all I can ask. Go, little brother. Make the world a better place." She kissed him on the forehead. Kevan smiled at her, then

followed the rest of the wardens back to their camp.

#

"You said your name was Kevan?" Duncan asked.

The dwarf shrugged. "Kevan Brosca." He glanced back towards his sister, and made a decision. "Maybe just call me Brosca."

"Brosca." They walked in silence for a few minutes. Brosca kept turning the mace over and over in his hands as if scarcely believing it was his. "We head into the deep roads tomorrow. A scouting mission more than a hunt." Brosca nodded, and Duncan continued, "after that we are heading topside for a while. A brief stop at Highever and then on to the Ferelden Mage Tower."

"Topside?" Brosca asked, then shrugged. "Not like I have any rank to lose going to the surface."

"Once we get done with this investigation, we'll stop by one of the compounds and make your membership in our order official."

Brosca smiled. "So... about this wardening business..."

"Yes?"

"Do we get paid?"

Duncan smiled. Somehow, he thought his new recruit would

do just fine.

#

Duncan made sure he had a few moments to make a personal farewell to the Lady Aeducan.

"How is your new recruit working out?"

"Sort of odd having a recruit for whom sleeping on a rough mat in an unused section of cavern is a step up."

"Ah, but that's also the fine dwarven spirit at work for you. We come from the stone, it's a part of who we are. Put of us in one of those surface 'feather beds' I keep hearing about and then you'll hear some real complaining."

Duncan laughed at that. "He'll be a warden. Feather beds are a threat he'll never have to worry about." He waited until a passing guard moved out of earshot. "Thank you for your assistance."

Lady Aeducan frowned at the passing guard.

"Is something wrong?"

"Politics. Nothing you need to worry about, my friend. Just dwarven politics. A part of me envies your new recruit. I wish I could leave all this behind and go do what needs be done instead of worrying about which Deshyr has his beard in a knot today."

"Not too late for you to pack a bag and come along." For a moment, Duncan found himself filled with the irrational hope that she'd say yes. He told himself, again, not to be foolish.

Saitada smiled. "Everything is arranged for the feint into the Deep Roads tomorrow morning. Good luck, Duncan. And if Orzammar can do more, send word. I'll do what I can."

Duncan nodded, glancing down the hall to where Trian stood, berating the guard. He feared that Orzammar would be a different place once King Endrin passed. A pity Saitada was not the first born. Still, if some of the rumors he'd heard had any truth to him, perhaps that would not be an issue. Endrin was polite to the wardens, but if it were Saitada on the throne... Alas, saying such out loud could only cause problems. As commander of Orzammar's military, Saitada would still be positioned to be of plentiful help to the wardens. Always nice working with the dwarves, who knew better than any the threat of Darkspawn was not some abstract fade notion.

And as a commander, perhaps they would indeed find themselves fighting side by side. He gave her a bow, and went back to join the other wardens.

6. Chapter 6

Saitada left the fancy armor on its rack, and went for the more practical plate. She added a small handaxe to her belt before picking up her shield and heading to the door. Gorim was waiting just outside. She gave him a quick once over and noted that he'd added a crossbow to his weapon harness. She gave him a nod of approval. "Time is rusting."

The mood among the soldiers was excitement as she walked through them. Here and there she stopped to hand out a smile, compliment, or a quick instruction to fix an errant strap. Her father was dressed in his armor, and she struggled to keep the worried expression off her face. Even surrounded by guards, he had no business on the field. She sighed, and walked to join him.

Duncan and the other Grey Wardens were already there. She gave them an approving look and noted that they'd acquired armor for their new recruit. The casteless dwarf looked a bit nervous at the company he was keeping, and his fingers kept touching the mace at his side as though assuring himself it was still there.

Harrowmont stepped forward, his voice ringing through the stone tunnels. "Trian and his men will clear the way for the Grey Wardens to descend into the easternmost caverns."

Those caverns are still infested by the worst of the darkspawn. We cannot risk our own troops there."

"Understood, Lord Harrowmont. We should be able to sense the darkspawn and avoid them once the way is open."
Duncan's voice was steady, and his face calm. A man doing his duty, rather than a man seeking glory. There was a mild pang of disappointment that she would not be with the group escorting the wardens. She had a feeling watching Duncan go into battle would have been a sight to behold.

"May the Paragons favor you, and the Stone catch you if you fall." Endrin's voice sounded strong. She didn't even want to think about how many potions he must have down that morning.

Her elder brother raised his maul above his head as he turned to his men. "Come, men, glory awaits!" A cheer answered his words. Saitada hoped it was for him rather than the mission. She didn't miss the joyful look on Edir's face as he strode behind her brother. The Grey Warden's joined the procession.

Harrowmont's voice came again, a little quieter this time. "Bhelen, you and your men will second the king, clearing the main road." Saitada's eyes narrowed slightly. That wasn't the plan Trian had mentioned to her earlier.

"Don't you think it looks a little... cowardly to allow these humans to take our place where the fighting is thickest?" Bhelen looked crestfallen. And yet there was something... Saitada shook her head.

"Are you questioning the battle plan?" Harrowmont asked, his face betraying his irritation at her younger brother.

"Of course not. I'm sure your caution is for the glory of us all."

"Enough, Bhelen." King Endrin glared, and Bhelen shrunk in on himself slightly before his father's eyes. "Take your men and make ready. Harrowmont and I need to have words with your sibling."

"Good luck, my sister," Bhelen said. Saitada turned, eyes following him as he left. Something was off.

Harrowmont gave her a fatherly smile. "Your father has a special mission for you."

"In the eastern Deep Roads, there is a secret door carved into the stone." Endrin's eyes were bright as he looked at her. Part of her wanted to throw up her hands in frustration. A blight, yet another assassination attempt on her elder brother, and her father was playing favoritism games now? No wonder Bhelen had looked out of sorts.

"The door leads to a thaig abandoned long ago by your ancestors. The darkspawn have made it impossible to reach," Harrowmont said.

Endrin laid a hand on her shoulder. "My father believed that the shield of Paragon Aeducan remains in that thaig, under the stones of the central room. Reclaim the shield, and glory will be yours!" It should be Trian's, she thought to herself. He

needed it, now more than ever.

"The Shield of Aeducan would be quite the find." Perhaps she could finagle some way to present it to Trian. Maybe some kind of ceremony as they reclaimed the Thaig? She forced her attention back to Harrowmont.

"We've sent two scouts ahead to make sure the tunnels are cleared, but be careful. One of the scouts will meet you at the first crossroads you come to; the second will be further in. When you get to the door, use your signet ring to open it. Questions?"

Yes. Few she could ask before this many ears. What were you thinking came first to her mind. "Where do we go from there?"

"The crossroads where you meet the first scout will be the rendezvous point. There, you can present the shield to the lords and demonstrate the strength of Aeducan!"

"May the ancestors watch over you, my child." Endrin's smile trembled just slightly, and she gave him a respectful bow. Stone, if he kept this up, the assembly really was going to try to stick her with that blasted crown.

#

She entered the cavern, heading in the direction Harrowmont had given. Gorim held his silence until they were some distance away from any ears. "This sound a bit..."

"Rehearsed? Orchestrated?" Saitada shook her head.
"Idiotic?"

"I think the king is a little concerned you might just decide to join up with the wardens after all." Gorim tapped his fingers against the hilt of his sword as he followed her into the cavern.

"I hope that is all there is to it." She ran a hand over the back of her neck. "It's not. There is something else. I'm missing something here." She narrowed her eyes. "Could father actually want the council to name me to the throne?"

"Is it that outrageous a notion?" Gorim asked. "My lady, I know your feelings on the matter, but you cannot deny how many of your people want to see you on the throne."

"I can do more for them behind it," Saitada said. "Where my hands aren't bound. And I will not see Trian's birthright taken from him." She sighed. "It would destroy him." She shook her head then cocked her head to one side as she heard a scraping sound.

Gorim caught the motion, and put a hand to his sword. She drew her own, and together they moved to face the approaching genlocks.

#

Her smile was warm when she recognized the man waiting for them in the crossroads. Frandlin Ivo returned her smile. "You

made it, Commander. Did you run afoul of any darkspawn?"

Saitada shrugged. "Nothing we couldn't handle."

"We didn't expect any activity in these tunnels at all. Once I finished scouting the tunnels, I hid here to avoid the darkspawn. Most tunnels are dead ends. The one we want is swarming with those fiends. It's going to be a fight."

"I didn't get a chance to speak with you after the proving the other day. Your performance was exceptional." She kept her features steady as she observed him. Most people, upon being complimented by their princess, smiled or blushed. Ivo, however, turned slightly green.

"Your gift of the helm was amazingly generous." He turned away slightly as he spoke. "I will treasure it always. May today's battles bring us even more glory." He swallowed, and then his voice became brusque and businesslike as he turned back towards her. "I'll take rear guard. Shall we move?"

Saitada exchanged a quick look with Gorim before she continued to head into the tunnel. She'd have to examine the oddity of Ivo's behavior later, she thought to herself as the genlocks began to move towards them.

#

The scout popped up from behind a couple of rocks. "You're here! I thought the darkspawn had got you for sure."

"I'm not that easy to kill," Saitada said. Any lightheartedness she might have felt at the start of this little expedition had long since faded. Something about this whole thing smelled wrong.

"Then I'll make sure I'm behind you if we're swarmed. We want the tunnel ahead, but there are darkspawn tracks all over it. Be careful."

"I thought these tunnels were mostly abandoned," Saitada said as she continued down the tunnel. Gorim had shifted his position to rear guard. Her lips twitched slightly. Her second could read her like a book.

"Well, abandoned isn't vacant, apparently. Still, two months ago, we couldn't get within a mile of this place. I'll follow your lead, Commander."

#

They'd made it almost into the thaig before the mercenaries showed themselves. Their leader swaggered forward. "So glad you could finally join us," he said, opening his hands and spinning around to indicate all the men with him. "We feared you'd gotten eaten by darkspawn. Turns out the shield isn't quite as easy to retrieve as I was led to believe. I wager you know where it is, though." He hooked his thumbs into his weapon harness before leering at her. "So maybe you tell me where it is, and I don't let my boys have a go at you before I kill you."

Saitada rubbed her forehead irritably as she examined their

numbers and positions. "The shield's a metaphor. It's in all of us." If they weren't going to be serious about this, neither was she.

The leader smirked at her. "Oh. She's a funny one. Just what I needed. Now kill these idiots." He started to draw his sword, and the bolt from Gorim's crossbow caught him between the eyes.

Saitada's smile was fierce as she raised her shield and charged. She felt a slight jolt of surprise when Ivo charged beside her. The two of them spun, back to back, slicing through the mercenaries foolish enough to have tried to stand their ground. Gorim followed them in as the scout drew his own crossbow and started taking potshots.

Her eyes caught sight of the man aiming the ballista, and she gestured to Gorim before moving across the field, drawing the fire. She threw herself to the ground as the bolt fired, tumbling back to her feet in time to drive her sword into the stomach of a mercenary. Ivo blocked an overhand blow with his shield before taking the sword arm off his opponent just as Gorim reached the man working the ballista. Gorim brought his shield up and simply slammed into the man, crushing him between stone and angry warrior. Saitada caught a crossbow bolt on her own shield before closing with the last of their attackers.

She dusted herself off, then smiled. "Nice work," she said, looking over her companions. Gorim had a small scrape on his forearm, and Ivo had the start of what would be a rather impressive black eye. She wondered for a moment why he

wasn't wearing the helm she'd gifted him. The scout was untouched. "Let's find this shield and head home."

#

The puzzle was slightly more annoying than difficult. Stone slid back, revealing their prize. "That's it. We've got it!"

It was rather unimpressive, Saitada thought to herself. The scout echoed her thoughts aloud. "It doesn't look like much."

"The skill of our crafters has come far since then," Ivo said, shooting her a look as though he expected her to be offended by the scout's words. "But still..." A trace of awe entered his voice. "The Shield of Aeducan."

Saitada picked it up. She was surprised by how well balanced it was, despite its plain appearance. "It's a symbol; that's all."

"If it helps rally the troops, it's a good thing," the scout said.

She nodded agreement. It should be Trian here. "Enough talk. Where is the rendezvous point?"

"Back in the direction we came from, at the crossroads," the scout replied.

"To the crossroads!" Gorim said, sheathing his sword.

#

Gorim fell into step beside her. He held out his hand, showing

her the Aeducan signet ring. "I found it on the mercenary captain. It's Trian's."

"Then it was stolen."

"My lady..." He sighed. "If Trian really were scheming against us, this would be the perfect place for an ambush. We've got the shield, and we're all alone out here."

"Trian is my brother. He would never do anything like that."

"I wish I had your confidence." Gorim was about to say something else when the scout stepped towards them.

"What's that you're muttering about?" the scout asked. Gorim's eyes widened at the impertinence.

"Keep your mind on the mission," Saitada's voice was sharp enough to make Gorim jump.

"Right you are, Commander," the scout replied nervously, falling back to put both Gorim and Ivo between himself and the princess.

#

They came around the corner and stopped dead in their tracks. The bodies of a dozen dwarves were strewn around the chamber. Saitada let out a wounded cry, and ran to one of the bodies. She knelt down beside it, then gently cradled her brother's head.

"By the Stone," Gorim said. "It's Trian!"

Ivo drew his sword and looked around. "It must have been a darkspawn attack."

The scout shook his head. "This doesn't look like darkspawn. No bites, no scratches, no mutilation."

Gorim moved to stand next to his princess. Her eyes were bleak as she gently closed Trian's eyes. She pressed a kiss to his forehead, and stood. "We need to warn my father," she said.

He heard a sound, and put a hand to his sword. "Someone's coming." His eyes widened when Bhelen led the King's party into the chamber. He shot a glance at Saitada, and saw realization darken her eyes.

Endrin looked at the body on the ground, then back up at Saitada. His face paled, and he took an involuntary step towards her. "My daughter. Tell me this isn't what it looks like."

"What does it look like?" Saitada said, her voice empty, her eyes fixed on Bhelen.

"It looks like you killed our brother, you monster!" Bhelen said. Gorim didn't miss the slight gleam of satisfaction in the man's eyes.

He stepped forward. "My lady is innocent."

Harrowmont held up a hand. "Ser Gorim, your loyalty makes you a useless witness. It falls to others to tell the story. You, scout, what happened here?"

The scout edged away slightly, then squared his shoulders. "Trian and his men were here early. It seems they'd done battle with the darkspawn. Lady Aeducan came up to them, all friendly-like, but when we got close, she ordered us to attack!

Gorim looked back at Saitada. She remained silent, her eyes never leaving Bhelen's face. Harrowmont looked towards the other member of their party. "Frandlin Ivo, you are a good and noble man. Did the scout speak the truth?"

Ivo swallowed. "He... he did, my lord. It was... terrible. Prince Trian didn't stand a chance. Afterward, my lady stripped his signet ring."

"You treacherous bastard!" Gorim said, reaching for his own blade. He was stopped only by the slight shake of Saitada's head.

Endrin's voice was sharp. "Silence, Gorim. Do you have anything else to say, my daughter?"

"I'm sorry, Father."

"As am I," Endrin replied.

"Bind her," Harrowmont ordered. "She will be judged before

the Assembly. To Orzammar!"

#

She stared at the other side of the cell. Crude messages, insults, and prayers had been carved into it by many hands over the years. Here and there, a few of the condemned had even approached wisdom. Her fingers traced over one message in particular. 'I go to a warrior's death'.

A gleam of brighter light interrupted the dimness, and she heard the guard's voice. "You've got ten minutes, ser. Orders and all. You understand."

The second voice she knew well. Of course. Leave us alone, will you please?" Gorim asked.

"Yes ser."

She stood when Gorim came to the door of the cell. "My lady... I..." He met her eyes. "I would have come sooner had they allowed it. How are you?"

"Trian is dead. How do you think I am?" She sighed, then looked back at him. "I was worried for you."

"And I for you, my heart. I bring little but bad news, though. Bhelen has taken Trian's place in the Assembly. He introduced a motion to condemn you immediately, and it easily passed. He..." Gorim drove his fist into the wall. "He had fully half the Assembly ready to vote on something completely against

tradition and justice! He must have been making deals and alliances for months, if not years."

Saitada found herself giving a small laugh. "You have to respect Bhelen's ability to play the game."

"He's more clever than either of us ever thought. Some of the lords, especially Harrowmont are suspicious of Bhelen's instant rise to power. They are rallying, but far too slowly. The Assembly has already sentenced both of us."

Saitada nodded. She knew her fate the moment Bhelen had led her father into that chamber. No use worrying about it now. "What's going to happen to you?"

"My knighthood will be stripped, my name torn from my family records..." He sighed, then shook his head. "but I will be allowed to attempt some sort of life on the surface." She smiled. He didn't. "Lord Harrowmont moved for a similar exile for you, but Bhelen's supporters overwhelmed him. You're to be sealed in the Deep Roads to fight darkspawn until you are overwhelmed and killed."

One of her shoulders twitched. "The cowards weren't strong enough to kill me themselves."

"That may have been Bhelen's first mistake." He leaned forward. "Lord Harrowmont gave me access to see you so I could tell you this: Duncan and the Grey Wardens are still in the Deep Roads, in tunnels connected to those you are to be left in. If you survive long enough to find the Grey Wardens,

you may be able to escape with Duncan."

"That's all the chance I need." She drew herself up, and saw Gorim nod.

"Our time is up. May the Paragons guide your sword and the Stone hold you up."

"The same to you, my friend."

"I will always be your man, my Lady Aeducan."

The guard walked towards the cell. "They are ready for you now."

#

She was led to where Harrowmont was waiting. The man had aged a dozen years since the last time she'd seen him. Her thoughts went to her father for a moment, and then she drove those thoughts away. The guard shoved her forward. "Here is the prisoner, Lord Harrowmont."

"Having been found guilty of fratricide by the Assembly of Orzammar, you are hereby sentenced to exile and death. Your name is, from this point forward, stripped from the records. You are no longer a person, nor a memory. You are to be cast into the Deep Roads with only sword and shield, there to redeem your life by fighting the enemies of Orzammar until your death. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is carried out?" Harrowmont's tone was formal, but

his eyes were wet.

Saitada only shook her head. "You call this justice?" Her gaze went to each of the guards. None of them could meet her eyes.

"I would have prevented it if I could. Everyone should have the right to face his accuser and defend himself. Look me in the eye and tell me you didn't do this. For your father's sake."

For a moment, she considered remaining silent. How could her father even begin to think such a thing? "I didn't kill Trian." She said it more for Harrowmont's sake than anything else.

Harrowmont looked into her eyes, and his own widened before becoming angry. "I believe you. That means Bhelen planned this from the start. Believe me, I will spend the rest of my days making sure Bhelen does not profit by his deeds. Your father asked me to give these to you. This sword and shield are of fine dwarven make. Strike a blow at our enemies."

Saitada strapped the shield to her arm. "How is my father?"

"He is old and this tragedy has hit him hard. He will rest better now, though, knowing the truth."

"Tell him..." She sighed. "Tell my father I went to a warrior's death."

"I will. Open the doors and let the condemned walk through."

He paused, then continued. "May the Stone accept you when you fall."

She smiled at him, then turned to the gate. She held her head up as she strode through. Grief would have to wait. A blight was coming.

7. Chapter 7

Brosca was proving to be a skilled scout. Though he couldn't yet sense the darkspawn, he was adept at eluding them and moving through the tunnels unseen. He was also displaying a knack for both disarming and setting traps. Even if they didn't get the information they were looking for, the trip to Orzammar had definitely proved worthwhile.

One of the scouts signaled that he'd heard something. Duncan examined his senses, but there did not appear to be darkspawn nearby. He was about to dismiss the sound as deepstalkers when a barefoot dwarf in battered armor appeared. "By the Maker, it's a dwarf!" Harl said, striding forward. He stopped short as the dwarf removed her helmet.

Duncan pushed past him. "Lady Aeducan! What are you doing here alone? Where are your troops?"

She smiled at him tiredly. "It is good to see you again, Duncan."

He returned the smile as he walked towards her. "And you as well, although I am still filled with questions. Such as why are you in these tunnels alone? May I ask what happened?"

"I am Lady Aeducan no longer." She squared her shoulders,

and looked up at him.

He saw the meaning of the words in her eyes. "Ah. You have been made to walk the Deep Roads, then." He wanted to put his arms around her, and... he shook his head.

Behind him, Alistair spoke. "You mean you were exiled? What happened?"

Duncan shot him a sharp look. "I do not think matters of dwarven honor are any business of ours."

"I was betrayed by my brother."

Duncan's eyes widened, and he shook his head in disbelief. He could not imagine... "Lord Trian?"

"No, Bhelen." Saitada's voice held no trace of emotion. "Trian is dead."

"I see." He laid a hand on her shoulder. "The brutal intrigue of the dwarven court continues, then. There is no reason for you to walk these Deep Roads and die for something you did not do. You have already proven yourself both resourceful and skilled, and I would expect nothing less from an Aeducan. When last we spoke, you told me you wished you could join our order. I imagine this isn't quite what you meant, but you may still find great honor here. As leader of the Grey Wardens here in Ferelden, I would like to formally invite you to join our order."

"I would be honored."

"Then welcome. We leave immediately for Ostagar to join with human forces facing the darkspawn hordes, led by King Cailan. Stay close. There are still darkspawn around every corner..." He took in her appearance once more, and mentally kicked himself. "Harl, get our new sister something to eat and drink."

Duncan gave Saitada a once over, taking in the ill-fitting and mismatched armor. Saitada glanced down at herself and gave a rueful shrug. "You should have seen the dress they exiled me in." She waved a hand over her head, and gave a prim smile. "Clashed horribly with my hair."

Brosca couldn't contain a snort of laughter, then paused thoughtfully. "We are what, five days out from Orzammar, considering how long we spent looking around that thaig? You've been on your own that long?"

"Seven days, but who is counting?" Saitada accepted the food and drink gratefully.

"Huh" Brosca shrugged. "I guess that's the last time I make a comment about nobles being soft."

#

Harl caught Duncan's concerned look, and dropped his voice to a whisper. "You're worried her helping us had something to do with what happened."

"I do not think it was the cause," Duncan replied. "It simply presented the opportunity."

"I'm not sure if that makes me feel relieved, or more guilty," Harl said. He sighed. "Orzammar's loss is our gain."

"I cannot argue with that," Duncan replied. He leaned back. "They are massing under the wilds. As soon as we reach the surface, we must send word to Cailan."

"Ostagar, you think?"

"I do."

#

Harl raised an eyebrow at Brosca. The younger dwarf was staring at Saitada again. He caught the look and blushed before shaking his head. "Sorry. It's just... the princess of Orzammar is cooking me breakfast. Even in my dreams I never..." he blushed even harder.

He heard Harl chuckle. "She is not a princess any longer."

Brosca shook his head. "Don't care what the idiot Deshyrs say. That there is a princess."

Harl followed his gaze, then nodded. "I suppose I see your point." Both men got to their feet as Saitada brought them over food. She grabbed a plate for herself, then joined them.

Brosca tasted the meal, then smiled. "You actually know how

to cook," he said.

She smiled. "One of our cooks taught me when I was a child. I kept in practice mostly to annoy..." she trailed off, then shook her head. "I can manage a few simple meals." She looked up at Harl. "So what brought you to the wardens?"

"I stole a horse," Harl replied. "Unfortunately, not a very fast one. Got caught. We got attacked by some spawn while they were fitting me for a noose. I got free. Thought about running, but couldn't leave even those jackasses to spawn, so I grabbed a branch and started hitting. The wardens showed up just as I was realizing how stupid not-running was, and then Duncan asked if I'd like to join up. I said yes, and here I am. It's a slightly better life than horse-thief."

"You make it sound so glamorous," Saitada said, putting a hand on her heart. "If I'd only known, I'd wouldn't have dawdled in the deep roads so long."

"Hey, I haven't even begun the pitch," Harl said. "Sometimes, we are even allowed to set foot in taverns."

"Be still my heart," Saitada said. "I'm not sure I can take such luxury." She smiled. "Have you ever read Warden-Commander Kedrik's memoirs?"

"No ma'am. Can't read," Harl said, blushing slightly.

"Me either. On both counts," Brosca said.

"Oh." She shrugged. "I can teach you, if you'd like."

Harl blinked. "Really?"

"Certainly. Ridding the world of all darkspawn can't take up that much of our time, after all."

#

"Your performance at the Proving was impressive. I'd like to learn that spin you did with the axe."

It took Brosca a moment to realize Saitada was talking to him. "You... oh, you were there... you were sitting with Duncan." He felt himself starting to babble a bit, and swallowed.

Saitada smiled. "I knew you weren't Everd. He's never moved that fast in his life. I figured you were his second or something."

He shrugged. "Nope, just a worthless duster." He glanced down at his mace. "You'll be wanting this back, I suppose. It's Aeducan." Offering it back to her felt like tearing his own arm off.

Saitada gave him a puzzled look, and shook her head. "It was for the winner of the Proving. If I didn't want you to have it, I never would have asked Duncan to pass it over to you."

He stared. "You... you sent it to me?"

"You earned it. Duncan came to Orzammar seeking the best

to join the Wardens. You proved that was you."

"Didn't you win the Proving held in your honor?" he asked, smiling tentatively.

She laughed. "Lord Harrowmont got the notion he was going to arrange a marriage between me and whatever lordling won. I decided I had more important things to worry about than avoiding courtship." She chuckled, then her voice became sad. "I suppose I still do."

She sat down across from him, leaning against the cavern wall. He glanced at her from lowered eyes, watching her watch the humans. It was hard, reconciling this woman in battered armor, this woman who talked to him like an equal, with the princess of Orzammar. The words came out of him in a rush. "I'm sorry about what happened to you. I heard... I heard you spoke out for the surface dwarves. You said they were dwarves and should have their rights returned."

She raised an eyebrow. "You heard about that?"

He shrugged. "Surface dwarves are treated like casteless. They slum it sometimes." He frowned as a thought struck him. "Do you think that's why you got tossed out?"

She sighed. "I'd be a fool to think that was the only reason." She poured a cup of tea, and offered it to Brosca before taking one for herself. "We will be on the surface tomorrow. Have you ever been?"

He shook his head. "No. Any duster goes up isn't allowed back. And... well... there is not stone up there." He sipped the tea. "It's really happening, isn't it? We are going to be surface dwarves?"

Saitada grinned. "No, my friend. We are going to be wardens."

8. Chapter 8

Cathiel leaned on the doorframe and watched her father. Teryn Cousland and Arl Howe looked almost like young men again as they discussed the king's call to arms.

"I trust, then, that your troops will be here shortly?" Teryn Cousland asked his old friend.

Howe nodded. "I expect they will start arriving in the next couple days, and we can march soon enough. I apologize for the delay, my lord. This is entirely my fault. I heard the rumors, of course, but thought we'd have time to get the harvest in before anything came of them."

"No, no. The appearance of the darkspawn in the south has us all scrambling, doesn't it? I only received the call from the king a few days ago, myself." Her father spread his arms. "I'll send my eldest off with my men. You and I will ride out together, just like the old days!"

"True." Howe tapped a finger to his temple. "Though we both had less gray in our hair then. And we fought Orlesians, not... monsters."

"Ha. At least the smell will be the same." He must have heard her snicker at that, as he turned towards her. "I'm sorry pup; I

didn't see you there. Howe, you remember my daughter?"

"I see she's become a lovely young woman. Pleased to see you again, my dear." He gave her a small bow.

She smiled, and gave a similar bow in response. "Is your family here, Arl Howe?"

"Oh no, I left them in Amaranthine, well away from the fighting in the south. They do send their best wishes." He glanced at her father, then back at her again. "My son Thomas asked after you. Perhaps I should bring him with me next time."

"I'd like that," she said.

"Good! My son saw you at a Denerim fair and has talked about you ever since. He'll be pleased you remember him."

She was about to ask after Thomas when her father interrupted. "At any rate, pup, I summoned you for a reason. While your brother and I are both away, I'm leaving you in charge of the castle."

"I'll do my best, Father," she replied.

"Now, that's what I like to hear. Only a token force is remaining here, and you must keep peace in the region. You know what they say about mice when the cat is away, yes?" He gave her a wink. "There's also someone you must meet. Please... show Duncan in."

Duncan gave the Teryn a small bow as he approached. He recognized the other man as Arl Howe. Judging by the resemblance between the young woman and the Teryn, she was likely his daughter. He racked his brain for a moment trying to remember if she was the elder or younger child. Ser Gilmore had been quite effusive of the young woman's skill at archery. "It is an honor to be a guest in your hall, Teryn Cousland."

How shifted slightly. "Your Lordship, you didn't mention that a Grey Warden would be present."

"Duncan arrived just recently, unannounced." Teryn Cousland raised an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

"Of course not, but a guest of this stature demands certain protocol. I am... at a disadvantage."

"We rarely have the pleasure of seeing one in person, that's true. Pup, Brother Aldous taught you who the Grey Wardens are, I hope?"

"They're an order of great warriors," Cathiel said. Duncan saw her bright eyes look him over before she gave him a respectful nod.

Teryn Cousland smiled broadly. "They are the heroes of legend, who ended the blights and saved us all." He gestured at Duncan. "Duncan is looking for recruits before joining us and his fellow Wardens in the south. I believe he's got his eye on Ser Gilmore."

Duncan weighed his options briefly. If she were the younger... "If I might be so bold, I would suggest that your daughter is also an excellent candidate."

Teryn Cousland narrowed his eyes, and Duncan realized he'd overstepped as the man shifted to stand between him and the young woman. "Honor though that might be, this is my daughter we are talking about."

Cathiel gave her father a teasing smile. "Perhaps that would get me into battle."

Teryn Cousland wagged a finger at her. "That discussion is closed."

Arl Howe laughed. "You did just finish say that Grey Wardens are heroes, old friend."

Teryn Cousland shook his head at the lot of them. "I've not so many children I'll gladly see them all off to battle." His face suddenly grew concerned. "Unless you intend to invoke the Right of Conscription...?"

Duncan quickly reassured him. "Have no fear. While we need as many good recruits as we can find, I've no intention of forcing the issue."

He nodded, then looked back at his daughter. "Pup, can you ensure that Duncan's requests are seen to while I'm gone?"

"Of course."

"In the meantime, find Fergus and tell him to lead the troops to Ostagar ahead of me."

"But I'd like to stay and talk to Duncan."

"You'll have plenty of time later. We must discuss the battle plans in the south." He gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Be a good lass and do as I've asked. We'll talk soon."

Cathiel bowed, and left the room. Teryn Cousland smiled after her before turning back to Duncan. "Where were we... oh, yes, the supplies..."

#

Her brother was already dressed in his armor. Oren was practically bouncing up and down in excitement. "Is there really going to be a war, papa? Will you bring me back a sword?"

Fergus ruffled his son's hair. "That's "sword," Oren. And I'll get you the mightiest one I can find, I promise."

Oriana watched quietly. "I wish victory was indeed so certain. My heart is... disquiet."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't frighten the boy, love. I speak the truth." He met Cathiel's eyes as she entered. "And here's my little sister to see me off. Now dry your eyes, love, and wish me well." He caught Oriana's chin and bent his head down to kiss her.

Cathiel made a playful gagging sound. "Just let me know when you two are finished."

Fergus continued kissing his wife for a few more seconds before looking back at her. "Ha! When there's a man in your life, you'll understand."

She gave him a haunted look. "No fewer than three, if you please."

"Such a thing would bring shame upon this house, Sister." Oriana glanced at her husband, and mischief danced briefly in her eyes. "But if it's true, you must be discreet."

Fergus opened his mouth, then closed it again before turning back to his wife. "I'm... not sure how I should take that, love."

She laid a hand on his arm and Cathiel shot her a wink. Oriana looked up at her husband lovingly. "As the advice of a practical Antivan woman, my dear."

Cathiel shook her head at both of them before turning her attention to her brother. "I wish I could go with you."

"I wish you could come!" He gave her a confident smile. "It'll be tiring, killing all those darkspawn myself."

"In Antiva, a woman fighting in battle would be... unthinkable." Oriana's voice was more puzzled than disapproving.

"Is that so?" Fergus ran a hand down her cheek. "I always heard Antivan women were quite dangerous."

"With kindness and poison only, my husband."

"This from the woman who serves me my tea." Fergus shook his head and laughed.

"Did you know there was Grey Warden in the castle?" Cathiel asked.

Oren's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Really?! Was he riding a griffon?"

"Shush, Oren. Griffons only exist in stories now." Oriana smoothed her son's hair.

"I'd heard that," Fergus said. "Did he say why he's come?"

"He's going to test Ser Gilmore."

"Good for him! I hope he makes it." Fergus looked her over. "If I were a Grey Warden, though, I'd have my eye on you -" He shrugged. "Not that Father would ever allow it."

"Well, as much fun as teasing you is, I bring a message: Father wants you to leave without him."

"Then the Arl's men are delayed. You'd think his men were all walking backwards (sighs). Well, I'd better get underway. So many darkspawn to behead, so little time. Off we go then. I'll see you soon, my love." He bent to kiss Oriana again, and Oren and Cathiel looked at each other before making gestures of disgust. Fergus held out one hand to give a rude gesture of his own.

Their mother let out a small cough from the doorway, and everyone immediately put their innocent faces on. Teryn Cousland stepped in. "I would hope, dear boy, that you planned to wait for us before taking your leave?"

"Be well, my son. I will pray for your safety every day you are gone." Worry and pride fought for control of Eleanor Cousland's face.

"Fergus will be fine," Cathiel said.

"I keep telling you, no darkspawn will ever best me."

Oriana laid a hand over her heart. "The Maker sustain and preserve us all. Watch over our sons, husbands, and fathers and bring them safely back to us."

Fergus put his own hand over his heart. "And bring us some ale and wenches while you're at it." He caught Oriana's look. "Err... for the men, of course."

"Fergus," Oriana set her face into prim lines. "You would say this in front of your mother?"

"What's a wench?" Oren asked. "Is that what you pull on to get the bucket of of the well?"

"A wench is a woman that pours the ale in a tavern, Oren. Or a woman who drinks a lot of ale," Teryn Cousland said, stepping in to save his son from the wrath of wife and mother.

Eleanor shook her head fondly. "Bryce! Maker's breath, it's

like living with a pair of small boys. Thankfully, I have a daughter."

"She means you," Cathiel said to Oriana, eliciting another eyeroll from Eleanor.

Fergus chuckled. "I'll miss you, Mother dear. You'll take care of her, Sister, won't you?"

"Mother can handle herself. Always has."

"It's true. They should be sending her, not me. She would scold those darkspawn back into the deep roads." Fergus ducked as Eleanor gave him one of her looks.

"Well, I'm glad you find this so funny," she said, crossing her arms and smiling.

Teryn Cousland laughed. "Enough, enough. Pup, you'll want to get an early night. You've much to do tomorrow." He took his wife's arm, and drew her away.

Fergus smiled at Cathiel. "Getting sent to bed early, are we?"

"I don't mind." She gave a slow, considering smile. "I might have company."

"What?" Fergus gaped at her before laughing. "You saucy minx!"

"Fergus! Really!"

"Well, I sure hope he's worthy of your time, or I'll have to have a chat with the fellow. Heh. At any rate, I'll miss you. Take care of everyone, and be here when I get back."

Oren grabbed her hand. "Mama says you're going to be watching over us while papa is gone. Is that true, Auntie?"

Cathiel smiled down at him fondly. "I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"But you are my auntie! What else could I call you, silly?"

"Your aunt no doubt thinks it makes her sound too old, Oren."

"But she is old! But not as old as you, mama."

Cathiel nearly fell over laughing as Oriana turned to glare at her husband. "This is your influence, Fergus."

"What?" He held his hands up in a warning gesture. "I didn't say anything."

"Are you going to teach me to use a sword, Auntie? Then I can fight evil, too! Take that, dire bunny! All darkspawn fear my sword of truthiness."

"You bet! Let's go!" Cathiel said, mimicking his excited jumping.

"Fergus, there are times your family causes me great pain." Oriana almost couldn't get the last few words out without laughing.

Fergus shook his head. "Now, now. Mind your mother, Oren."

"I never get to do anything!" Oren kicked the ground before walking towards his bed.

"Don't worry, son. You'll get to see a sword up close real soon, I promise."

#

Duncan found the young woman in the hall as he walked towards the room he'd been given. She smiled at him. "Is it true Grey Wardens used to ride griffons into battle?"

"It is, though they have been extinct for many years now."

She laughed. "Pity. I'd join up in a heartbeat for the chance to see one. Have you tested Ser Gilmore?"

"I intend to in the morning."

"Shouldn't take you long. He is one of the best we have. The smiths mentioned we'll be supplying you with some additional weapons?"

"Your father is a generous man."

"He is," she said, smiling fondly. "I'll make sure everything is ready for you when you return from Denerim." She cocked her head at him. "What are you doing now?"

"It has been a long journey. I intend to put these old bones to

rest."

"You don't look that old," she said. "I was hoping we could get the chance to talk more."

"I will certainly see you at tomorrow's dinner, if not sooner."

She took a step towards him. "What about tonight... in my room?"

He blinked as she ran her hand down his arm. "I-I appreciate your enthusiasm, but it would be inappropriate for me to be in your quarters unescorted." He was considering how to extract himself from the situation when he heard the voices of Teryn Cousland and Saitada. He glance behind him as they walked into the corridor, then looked back at Cathiel. She was leaning against the wall again, her face a portrait of innocence. "Until the morning, then. I look forward to it."

She gave him a brazen smile before sauntering off. Teryn Cousland was looking down at Saitada, but it was clear from the twitch of Saitada's lips that she'd caught on to what had just occurred. He sighed, and went to his room.

#

Duncan tried to avoid the knowing glances Saitada sent him. He was fortunate, he supposed, that none of the others had come along to speak with the Teryn. He was doubly fortunate that the Teryn himself apparently hadn't noticed... he stopped a moment. "Saitada, did the Teryn..."

"Get thoroughly distracted showing off the Highever forges to a certain dwarven warden recruit? He most certainly did. And they aren't bad, actually, for human work."

Duncan smiled. "I truly appreciate what you suffer through on my behalf."

"Not so much suffering. When we stop back by on the way from Denerim, there will be a nice new set of armor waiting for me."

Duncan nodded.

"So..." Saitada prompted.

"I'm glad you were able to get new gear. That stuff you stole off a darkspawn was getting a bit battered."

"She'd make a good warden."

"I'm not recruiting her just because..." Duncan caught sight of Saitada's teasing smile. "She would, actually."

"Probably why she was able to get you alone so easily."

"Yes, she was quite interested in hearing about the history of the Wardens."

"Good with a bow, too, I hear."

The innocent lilt in Saitada's voice was starting to make him nervous. "Ser Gilmore said she's got her mother's gift for

archery. The Couslands fought in the rebellion."

"Never hurts to have allies with fine forges."

"True, and you aren't the only one who got some new equipment," he said, touching the new dagger that hung from the back of his belt.

"And she's got a fine set of breasts"

"Yes she..." Duncan buried his face in his hands as Saitada tried to hide a smile. "I'm old enough to be her father. Way too old to be distracted by..."

"A shapely rear end?"

"I was going to say a lovely and intelligent young woman..." Duncan sighed. "Yes, fine, I got cornered and manhandled by the Teryn's young daughter. You can laugh now."

"My dear Duncan, I would never dream of laughing at you. Aloud. Where you could see me." She smiled. "Don't worry. I won't say anything to the others. Perhaps you should have taken her up on the offer. Always helpful to remember what it is we are fighting for." He didn't miss her eyes traveling to the direction of the mountains, but was wise enough not to mention it. She continued, "of course, it would be easier to not mention anything if I was busy say, checking out the library at the tower?"

Duncan smiled. "You just wasted your blackmail, I was

planning on bringing you anyway." Saitada laughed. "Irving, the First Enchanter, has a potential candidate for a recruit in mind."

"I've met a couple mages, but never actually seen one in action. Should be interesting. You know, if you need to sneak away later, I can cover for you."

Duncan shook his head, and laughed quietly. "I have no intentions towards the daughter of the Teryn."

"Is it the noble blood that is shying you away?"

"No."

She gave a catlike smile. "Good." She walked off, leaving him staring after her. After a moment, he smiled.

9. Chapter 9

Lenore stared at the glowing pedestal as Greagoir's voice droned over the proceedings. "Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him. Thus spoke the prophet Andraste as she cast down the Tevinter Imperium, ruled by mages who had brought the world to the edge of ruin. Your magic is a gift, but it's also a curse, for demons of the dream realm - the Fade - are drawn to you, and seek to use you as a gateway to the world."

Irving took her arm, and guided her towards the pedestal. She looked across and saw Cullen watching her. He looked nervous, but tried to give her a reassuring smile. Irving's voice filled her ears. "This is why the Harrowing exist. The ritual sends you into the Fade, and there you will face a demon, armed only with your will."

"I am ready," she said, lifting her chin.

"Know this, apprentice: if you fail, we Templars will perform our duty." He gestured at the other men. Cullen shuffled his feet slightly. "You will die. This is lyrium: the very essence of magic and your gateway into the Fade."

"The Harrowing is a secret out of necessity, child. Every mage must go through this trial by fire. As we succeeded, so shall

you. Keep your wits about you, and remember the Fade is a realm of dreams. The spirits may rule it, but your own will is real."

Greagoir gave Irving an irritated look. "The apprentice must go through this test alone, First Enchanter. You are ready."

She lifted her hand, and touched the pedestal.

#

The world she found herself in was strange and alien. This was no part of the fade she recognized. A small, furry brown rodent looked up at her, then spoke. "Someone else thrown to the wolves. As fresh and unprepared as ever. It isn't right that they do this, the Templars. Not to you, me, anyone."

"No, it isn't right at all," Lenore said, looking around. She touched one of the walls. It gave slightly beneath her touch, like leather.

"But they keep doing it, don't they? We get treated like rabid dogs, and we let them get away with it!" The mouse sighed. "It's always the same. But it's not your fault. You're in the same boat I was, aren't you?" His form shifted, and then a young man in apprentice robes was standing in front of her. "Allow me to welcome you to the Fade. You can call me... well, Mouse."

"Not your real name, I take it?" She looked him over, wondering idly what kind of spirit formed his true nature.

"No. I don't remember anything from... before. The Templars kill you if you take too long, you see. They figure you failed, and they don't want something getting out. That's what they did to me, I think. I have no body to reclaim. And you don't have much time before you end up the same."

"I'm sorry for what happened." She'd heard of such things. Spirits taking on the identities of mages lost in the fade.

"Don't waste time with all that talk. You don't want to end up like... this. There is something here, contained, just for an apprentice like you. You have to face the creature, a demon, and resist it, if you can. That's your way out. Or your opponent's, if the Templars wouldn't kill you. A test for you, a tease for the creatures of the Fade."

"Why pit me against such a creature?" she asked cautiously.

"A question for those in the tower. Maybe you'll be lucky enough to ask. Maybe someday, so will I. There are others here, other spirits. They will tell you more, maybe help. If you can believe anything you see. I'll follow, if that's alright My chance was long ago, but you... you may have a way out."

She let him follow. Better to remain aware of his location.

#

Another spirit stood atop a crest in the path. He worked a smithy of some kind. She walked towards him, curious.

"Another mortal thrown into the flames and left to burn, I see. Your mages have devised a cowardly test. Better you were pitted against each other to prove your mettle with skill, than to be sent unarmed against a demon."

"I agree, but I didn't have a choice." She bent to examine one of the items he had made. It looked to be a mage staff, but her eyes could not follow all the lines without her becoming dizzy.

"Indeed. The choice, and the fault, lies with the mages who sent you here. That you remain means you have not yet defeated your hunter. I wish you a glorious battle to come."

"Would one of these weapons affect the demon?" she asked, gesturing towards the staff.

"Without a doubt. In this realm, everything that exists is the expression of a thought. Do you think these blades be steel? The staves be wood? Do you believe they draw blood? A weapon is a single need for battle, and my will makes that need reality. Do you truly desire one of my weapons? I will give one to you... if you agree to duel me, first. Valor shall test your mettle as it should be tested."

She narrowed her eyes, and considered. "It seems you would prefer to kill me yourself."

The spirit drew itself up, practically radiating offense. "How dare you accuse me! I am no demon, preying upon helpless mortals to steal their essence! I am a being of honor and

valor! I am a warrior!"

"Then prove it!" She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin defiantly. "Help me fight the demon!"

"You are insolent... but your will is unquestionably strong. Very well, mortal. You prove to me that you possess the strength to resist this demon. Go, prove your worth as you must. I am confident you will succeed."

She let her fingers trail from staff to staff. One warmed at her touch, and she slid her hand around it. She gave the spirit a nod of thanks before continuing along the path. As she walked away, she heard his hammer start ringing again. Oddly, the sound gave her comfort.

#

The riddles of the sloth demon were a momentary divergence. She watched as the demon taught her odd companion how to turn into a bear, putting the information aside for examination at some future date. The bear's form was rough, and a good look in proper light revealed him to look little like an actual bear, but he seemed pleased enough with the more powerful shape.

This demon was not the challenge. She wasn't sure what made her so confident of this, save that she was sure the sloth demon would not have been able to best her at all. She walked back down the path towards the plateau that Mouse had warned her away from earlier.

A mote of light, shifting and forming, and then the demon stood before her. "And so it comes to me at last. Soon I shall see the land of the living with your eyes, creature. You shall be mine, body and soul."

Lenore sighed. "If I lose, the templars will still cut you down."

"They are welcome to try." It turned its gaze to her companion. "So this creature is your offering, Mouse? Another plaything, as per our arrangement?"

Ah. So there it was. She smiled in grim satisfaction. The bear reared back. "I'm not offering you anything! I don't have to help you anymore!"

"Awww. And after all those wonderful meals we have shared? Now suddenly the mouse has changed the rules?"

"I'm not a mouse now! And soon I won't have to hide. I don't need to bargain with you!"

"We shall see..." Long claws began to extend from the demon's hands.

Lenore narrowed her eyes, then used the staff to focus a beam of ice into the thing's midsection. It hissed and flowed backwards as the ice struck it. The bear dove in for an attack, and Lenore shifted her aim higher so as not to interfere. A few moments later, the demon's form dissolved and vanished. She waited a moment. Nothing happened.

The bear bounced from once side to the other. "You did it! You actually did it! When you came, I hoped maybe you might be able to... but I never really thought any of you were worthy."

She looked down at the staff in her hand. It was a lovely piece. She wondered idly if she could duplicate its shape outside the fade. "The ones you betrayed before me. What were their names?"

"What?" She wasn't sure how it managed to make the bear's face look confused, but it did. A trick of the fade, perhaps. "They were not as promising as you. It was a long time ago. I... I don't remember their names. I don't even remember my own name. It's the Fade, and the Templars killing me, like they tried with you."

"Anything to survive. Like an animal. Or worse."

"I am what the Fade has made me. Am I to blame for that? Deciding to exist or not exist is not a fair choice. I had no hope. You have shown me other possibilities. If you want to help. There may be a way for me to leave here, to get a foothold outside. You just need to want to let me in."

And there it was. "I'm starting to think the other demon wasn't my test."

"What? What are you... Of course it was! What else is here that could harm an apprentice of your potential?" The demon met her eyes. "You are a smart one. Simple killing is a

warrior's job. The real dangers of the fade are preconceptions, careless trust... pride." It's form shifted, revealing it's true nature. "Keep your wits about you, mage. True tests never end."

Light surrounded her, and then darkness.

10. Chapter 10

Lenore awoke to Jowan standing over her, his face revealing concern that bordered on fear. "Are you all right? Say something, please..."

"Jowan?" she said, blinking up at him.

He drew back, sitting down on the edge of the bed with a relieved sigh. "I'm glad you're all right. They carried you in this morning. I didn't even realize you'd been gone all night. I've heard about apprentices who never come back from Harrowings. Is it really that dangerous? What was it like?"

"We're friends but don't ask this. You know I can't tell you." She gave him a regretful look.

"Hmph. So much for friendship. I'll leave you alone then." He didn't move. "And now you get to move to the nice mages' quarters upstairs. I'm stuck here and I don't know when they'll call me for my Harrowing."

"Any day now, probably."

"I've been here longer than you have... Sometimes I think they just don't want to test me."

"Doesn't everyone go through a Harrowing?"

"The Tranquil never go through a Harrowing." He stood and began to pace back and forth, hands going everywhere. "You do the Harrowing, the Rite of Tranquility... or you die. That's what happens."

"They're not going to kill you, Jowan."

"They might not. But the Rite of Tranquility is just as bad... maybe worse. You've seen the Tranquil around the tower. Like Owain, who runs the stockroom. He's so cold. No, not even cold. There's just... nothing in him. It's like he's dead, but still walking. His voice, his eyes are lifeless."

"I'll watch for that next time I talk to Owain." She didn't have to. She knew what he was talking about. She watched her best friend pacing, and felt worry knot her stomach at the thought of him in that state.

"He's been made tranquil. I don't know how they do it exactly, but you're cut off from the Fade. It takes away your magic abilities, along with your dreams... and emotions. "

"It's awful."

"Apprentices can ask to be made tranquil if they fear the Harrowing. But the circle also forces tranquility on those they feel are weak. And sometimes they force it on apprentices they think might be too... dangerous as mages." He sighed, clearly realizing he was lecturing her on things of which she was already well aware. "I shouldn't waste your time with this. I was supposed to tell you to see Irving as soon as you woke

up."

"I should go talk to him immediately."

"You'd better not keep him waiting." He hesitated a moment.

"We can speak later."

#

She saw Cullen standing by a door. He was attempting to look as though he were on guard duty rather than waiting for her to walk by. As if she didn't know his routine better than he did. He looked up as she approached. "Oh, um, h-hello. I... uh, am glad to see your Harrowing went smoothly."

"Hello, Cullen," she said, keeping her smile polite.

"Th-they picked me as the Templar to strike the killing blow if...if you became an abomination. I-it's nothing personal; I swear. I...uh, I'm just glad you're all right. You know." He tried to match her distantly polite expression, but couldn't hold it for more than a few seconds.

She gazed at him a moment. "Would you really have struck me down?"

"I would've felt terrible out it..." He looked away for a moment before meeting her eyes again. "But... but I serve the Chantry and the Maker, and I will do as I am commanded."

Her eyes softened. "It's good to know you'll be there to protect me."

A trace of a smile touched his lips. "Um... I'm glad you see it that way."

She glanced over her shoulder, waiting until the patrolling templar was out of sight. "I have a few minutes."

His eyes lit up. "Well, I'm just guarding this storeroom..."

"Perhaps I can help you inspect it..." She arched a coy eyebrow.

He opened the door, then stepped back for her to enter.

"Yes...um...yes... I could use some assistance." He closed the door, then strode forward and wrapped her in his arms. "I was scared for you."

She leaned into his embrace, putting her own arms around him. "There were moments I was scared for me too." She met his face for a kiss.

"You'll. Um... you'll have more freedom now. You could even leave the tower if you wanted," he said. He ran his fingers through her silvery blond hair.

"That does invite some possibilities." She kissed him again. "We can talk more later. Irving is waiting for me."

Reluctantly, Cullen tore himself away from her blue eyes. "Best hurry then."

She left the room, glancing once over her shoulder to see his smile.

#

She stood just outside the door of Irving's office, eavesdropping quite shamelessly. A templar, Mathias, was doing the same thing on the other side of the door. He gave her a conspiratorial wink. "...many have already gone to Ostagar - Wynne, Uldred, and most of the senior mages! We've committed enough of our own to this war effort -" Greagoir was saying.

"Your own? Since when have you felt such kinship with the mages, Greagoir? Or are you afraid to let the mages out from under Chantry supervision, where they can actually use their Maker-given powers?" Irving retorted.

"How dare you suggest -"

The third man in the room caught sight of her and lifted his hand, stopping the other men. "Gentlemen, please. Irving, someone is here to see you."

Lenore painted a polite smile on her face and entered. "First Enchanter?"

Irving practically beamed at her. "Ah, if it isn't our new sister in the Circle. Come, child."

"This is...?" The stranger was giving her a considering look. It reminded her of the look the Valor spirit had given her in the fade.

"Yes, this is she." Pride practically dripped from Irving's voice.

Greagoir shook his head. "Well, Irving, you're obviously busy. We will discuss this later." He strode out of the room, Mathias falling into step behind him.

Irving watching him go before turning back to her and the stranger. "Of course. Well, then... where was I? Oh, yes. This is Duncan, of the Grey Wardens."

"A Grey Warden?" Lenore turned to give him another look. No wonder he had put her in mind of the valor spirit. "In the tower?"

Duncan nodded to her. "Grey Wardens go wherever duty sends them."

"You've heard about the war brewing to the south, I expect? Duncan is recruiting mages to join the king's army at Ostagar."

Her eyes widened. "I would like to defend Ferelden."

"With the darkspawn invading, we need all the help we can get, especially from the circle," he said, approval lightening his stern features.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The power you mages wield is an asset to any army. Your spells are very effective against large groups of mindless darkspawn. I fear if we don't drive them back, we may see

another Blight."

"Duncan, you worry the poor girl with talk of Blights and darkspawn. This is a happy day for her."

"We live in troubled times, my friend."

"We should seize moments of levity, especially in troubled times. The harrowing is behind you. Your phylactery was sent to Denerim. You are officially a mage within the Circle of Magi."

"Thank you, First Enchanter."

Duncan raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry - what is this phylactery?"

"Blood is taken from all apprentices when they first come to the tower and is preserved in special vials."

He nodded. "So they can be hunted if they turn apostate."

"We have few choices. The gift of magic is looked upon with suspicion and fear. We must prove we are strong enough to handle our power responsibly. You have done this. I present you with your robes, your staff, and a ring bearing the Circle's insignia. Wear them proudly, for you have earned them."

"Thank you," she said. She shot another quick glance at Duncan.

"It goes without saying that you should not discuss the

Harrowing with those who have not undergone the rite. Now, then... take your time to rest, or study in the library. The day is yours."

Cullen's words echoed in her mind. "Can I leave the tower?"

"Not yet. Remember, the tower's walls protect us as much as they protect others from us."

"I will return to my quarters."

"Would you be so kind as to escort Duncan back to his room, child?"

Lenore's smile was genuine. "It would be my pleasure."

"The guest quarters are on the east side of this floor, close to the library. Now, if you'll both excuse me, I have matters to discuss with Greagoir."

#

"Thank you for walking with me. I am glad for the company."

Lenore walked next to him eagerly. "I wanted to talk to you a little more."

"Yes? What about?"

"I just wanted to say how honored I am to meet you." The words practically exploded out of her.

The corners of his mouth lifted. "I am flattered. I was not expecting quite so warm a reception."

"I've read so many tales." She gestured grandly. "The Grey Wardens are great warriors. I am in awe." She thought briefly of the tapestry that had hung on the wall of her childhood room. The hero of the Fourth Blight on the back of his griffon, sword in hand, flying into battle against a monstrous dragon.

"Being a Grey Warden is a calling. A sacrifice. Our duty is to battle darkspawn wherever they appear. We are elves, humans, and dwarves united by this common purpose." She noted he was actually smiling now.

She glanced back towards Irving's office. "Have there been many darkspawn attacks?" Already she was beginning to compose arguments with the intent of convincing Irving to let her join the mages heading south.

"A horde has formed within the Korcari Wilds to the south. If they are not stopped, they will strike north into the valley. We Grey Wardens believe that an archdemon is leading the horde."

She blinked. "That sounds ominous."

"Darkspawn do attack the surface in ragtag bands, but archdemons are capable of rallying the darkspawn, turning them into an unstoppable force. A horde of darkspawn... a veritable army. It is dire news indeed. I fear this is what we will have to face."

"And the king is mustering an army to beat back this threat?"

"Yes. Perhaps it will be enough... if we play our cards right. Thank you for escorting me."

#

Duncan entered the room, and noted the young mage had followed him. "Is there something else I can do for you?"

"Why were Irving and Greagoir arguing about the war?"

"It is not my place to comment." He gave a mental sigh. And he did not want even the perception of taking sides in that particular age old dilemma.

"Please, I'd like to know." The girl's blue eyes were bright and interested.

It was clear from her earlier words that she had a great deal of respect for the wardens. It was pleasant, in it's way, considering how often he was met with borderline hostility.

"Greagoir serves the Chantry, and the relationship between the Chantry and mages has always been strained." He gave her a considering look, and found himself wanting to get a better measure of the young woman. "You've realized by now that the Chantry merely tolerates magic? They watch you only because they feel they must."

"Yes." She waved away the millenia of conflict between templar and mages with a gesture of one hand. "But they

were arguing about the war."

Duncan felt a small sense of satisfaction. This girl, at least, had her priorities straight. "Any mages who join the king's army can unleash their full power on the darkspawn. In fact, I'm counting on it. Greagoir may be afraid of what will happen. What if the mages decide they no longer want to be governed by the Chantry?"

She frowned at that, then looked back at him. "What are your opinions on the matter?"

"I believe we must defeat the darkspawn, one way or another. My opinions end there."

She nodded. "How many mages have joined the king's army?"

"When the king sent out the call, the Circle of Ferelden sent only seven mages to Ostagar. I asked King Cailin's permission to come and seek a greater commitment from the Circle."

"Seven is quite a few," she said. Then she frowned and shook her head.

"I hope to place a mage or two within every contingent. I cannot do with just seven. Mages will make all the difference in this battle. The darkspawn have their own magic, and our resources must exceed theirs."

"Do you think I could join the army?"

"I don't know." He watched her carefully. "Do you?"

He saw her actually considering her answer before meeting his eyes. "Yes. I think I could help."

"Then perhaps I shall speak to Irving about this later. Darkspawn are a greater threat than blood mages, even abominations. It takes decades for the world to recover from a Blight. I wish the Chantry could see that. We must stop at nothing to defeat the darkspawn -" He caught himself giving her the lecture he'd given many a recruit over the years. "Ah, listen to me. An old man's rantings can't be very interesting."

She gave him a wry smile. "As an apprentice, old men talking have defined my life."

"Yes, I'm sure they did." He chuckled.

"It was actually quite interesting." She glanced over her shoulder, and Duncan noted a young man kept peeking in after her. "I'd like to talk more, but I have duties to attend to."

"Of course. Don't let me keep you." He watched her leave.

Saitada entered from where she'd been standing outside the door. "This thing with young human females, is it part of the whole warden package?" She gave him a teasing smile.

"I'm probably the first man she's seen in years that isn't a Templar or a fellow mage. She'd have been just as fascinated by Brosca."

Saitada frowned. "I don't get mages."

"What?"

"All that power at their fingertips, and they let you treat them like casteless."

"It's... complicated."

"Of course it is. It's politics." She set a couple books on a table. "I found something you might be interested in."

"Oh?"

"There was a warden archive just south of Ostagar. Lots of books and stuff that were probably duplicated elsewhere, an armory, and this... reference to several treaties that were stored there that give wardens some pull with groups like the dwarves, Dalish, and what do you know, the Circle of Magi?"

"Excellent find. I'd heard a rumor about it, but nothing concrete."

"And look, they have it marked on a map."

Duncan smiled. "Can you make a copy?"

"I traded a couple stories of Orzammar for the assistance of a half dozen young apprentices. I have a legible copy of this and a few other things of interest."

"Good. Perhaps I'll spend some time in the library myself."

"We'll be on our way in the morning."

"I'll leave the library to you for now. I'm heading out to the practice yard, and giving some eager young templars a brief lesson in deep roads tactics."

"Oh?"

"Their trainer has copies of some of the works the Orlesian Chevaliers use for their training. I've a mind to start Harl and Brosca on those."

Duncan blinked at her, then smiled. "An excellent plan."

"Are we recruiting her?"

"Irving spoke highly of her abilities, and she seemed eager enough. We have a day to consider, but yes, I believe she will be coming with us when we leave."

11. Chapter 11

Jowan rushed up to her the moment she left the Grey Warden. "I'm glad I caught up to you. Are you done talking with Irving?"

She nodded distractedly, still considering what the warden had said. "I think I am, for now."

"I need to talk to you. Do you remember what we discussed this morning?"

She blinked at him. "Why are you whispering? It looks very suspicious."

"Shhhh! I... I just want to make sure we're not overheard. We should go somewhere else. I don't feel safe talking here."

"You're starting to worry me, Jowan."

"I've been troubled..." He shook his head, then grabbed her hand. "I'll explain. Come with me, please."

She nodded, and followed him into the small chantry. A young initiate looked up as they entered. Jowan nodded to Lenore. "We should be safe here."

Lenore flicked her gaze to the initiate. "You realize there's a

priest standing right here?"

The young woman smiled. "Not a priest. I am merely an initiate."

Lenore rubbed her forehead. She could feel the headache, the one she'd somewhat affectionately named after her old friend, starting up behind her eyes. "Jowan... what's going on?"

He looked at the initiate, then reached out a hand to her. The initiate took the hand, and smiled. "A few months ago, I told you that I... met a girl. This is Lily."

Lenore smiled, then turned to face her. "My condolences, Lily."

Lily broke into a wide smile of her own as Jowen made an exasperated sound. "Very funny."

"I'm truly happy for you both," she said.

"There is something else. Remember I said that I didn't think they wanted to give me my Harrowing? I know why. They're... going to make me tranquil. They'll take everything I am from me- my dreams, hopes, fears... my love for Lily. All gone..." His hands gestured wildly as he spoke.

"That sounds terrible," she said, struggling to make sense of what he had said. She frowned, then shook her head. He had to be overreacting again.

"They'll extinguish my humanity. I'll just be a husk, breathing

and existing, but not truly living."

She put a hand on his arm in an attempt to calm him. "How did you find out about this?"

Lily's voice was bleak. "I saw the document on Greagoir's table. It authorized the Rite on Jowan, and Irving had signed it."

Lenore's jaw dropped. She felt a flash of anger. "Why would they do this to you?"

"There's... a rumor about me. People think I'm a blood mage. They think that making me a Circle mage will endanger everyone."

Lenore had thought her jaw couldn't drop any further. "And are they right about that?"

"Of course not! But it's not safe for me here anymore. I need to escape. I need to destroy my phylactery. Without it, they can't track me down. We need your help. Lily and I can't do this on our own."

Lily stepped forward, holding out her hands entreatingly. "Give us your word that you will help and we will tell you what we intend."

"You have my word, Lily." Lenore laid her hands over Lily's, and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Thank you. We will never forget this."

"Tell me your plan, and make it quick."

"I can get us into the repository. But there is a problem. There are two locks on the phylactery chamber door. The first enchanter and knight-commander each hold one key. But it is just a door. There is enough power in this place to destroy all of Ferelden. What's a door to mages?"

Lenore considered, then frowned. "It can't be that easy."

"What if it is? We have to try. I once saw a rod of fire melt through a lock. You could get one from the stockroom. But Owain doesn't release such things to apprentices."

"I will go to the stockroom and retrieve this rod."

"We should stay here. One mage at the stockroom will attract less attention than a mage, an apprentice, and an initiate," Lily said.

"Good idea." Lenore flicked her eyes towards Jowan.

Lily nodded, and placed a comforting hand on Jowan's arm, guiding the man to sit and calm down. "Good luck. Our prayers go with you."

#

Getting the rod of fire was easier said than done, Lenore thought to herself as she aimed a blast of fire at a spider. How was it helping Jowan with one of his escapades so often ended in spiders? When she was done dealing with this

phylactery issue, she was going to go find Cullen and see what he thought about the two of them joining the wardens. Surely the wardens could find use for a solid templar.

She made her way back out of the storage, and laid the requisition form in front of Leorah. The woman congratulated her profusely before signing the form, and then she was on her way to the storage room. Owain took his time about checking over the form before giving her the rod.

On her way back to where she'd left Jowan and Lily, she slowed. For a moment, her eyes went in the direction of Irving's office. Maybe if she... Lenore sighed to herself. If there was no form, it didn't matter. If he had, then there was no changing his mind. Either way, this was the only help she could give the man she considered a brother.

#

Jowan was pacing again. Honestly, some days just being in the same room with him was exhausting. "I hate waiting," he said to Lily. "It makes me nervous."

Lenore walked up to him. "I have the rod of fire."

His eyes bugged. "That was quick!"

Lily gave her an impulsive hug. "To the repository, then. Freedom awaits."

Lenore found herself being dragged along by their

enthusiasm. It was like something out of a storybook. Young lovers, embarking on the first stage of the rest of their lives. She couldn't help but smile as the two of them began to talk about getting married. Jowan waxed rhapsodic about the thought of getting a farm somewhere.

#

Of course it didn't work. She didn't even know why that surprised her. The first door had been easy. Lily used the password, and then Lenore had been able to open the door. Then they'd come to the second door. She'd activated the rod of fire, but nothing had happened. Curious, she tried to draw her magic to her, but neither she nor Jowan could cast even the most simple of spells.

Lily indicated the wall. "These wards carved into the stone... this must be the templars' work. They negate any magic cast within this area." She smacked herself in the head. "I should have guessed! Why would Greagoir and Irving use simple keys for such a door? Because magical keys don't work!" Her voice became bitter. "How do you keep mages away from something? Make their powers completely worthless! That's it then! We're finished! We can't get in."

Lenore shook her head, then looked around. "That door there, where does it lead?"

Lily gave her a hopeful look. "I don't know. Do you think it's another way in?"

She looked down at the rod of fire in her hand. It worked well enough on this door, and soon they were wandering through the vault. She wished idly that she had more time to spend looking around. There were cases filled with books of lore, some of them in languages she didn't even recognize. Cautiously, they made their way into a room filled with various items.

Jowan walked around the room. "There's something odd about that statue..."

Lenore examined it. "Why would this be here?"

"How should I know? It's magical... this is a room of magical objects."

He jumped back when the statue spoke. "Greetings."

"Maker's breath! Did it just say something?" Jowan looked at it disbelievingly.

"I am the essence and spirit of Eleni Zinovia, once consort and advisor to Archon Valerius. Prophecy my crime, cursed to stone for foretelling the fall of my lord's house."

She looked at the statue. She thought she recalled something of the story. "Archon Valerius?"

Jowan shrugged. "I'm not sure. The archons were the lords of the Imperium."

"Forever shall you stand on the threshold of my proud

fortress,' he said, 'and tell your lies to all who pass...' But my lord found death at the hands of his enemies and his once-proud fortress crumbled to dust, as I foretold." The statue's voice was unearthly and distant, as though being spoken from down a long corridor."

Lily covered her mouth with her hands. She looked shaken. "A Tevinter statue! Don't listen to it! The Tevinter lords dabbled in many forbidden arts!" She put a hand on Jowan's arm. "This is a wicked thing!"

Lenore leaned towards it, examining it carefully. "How did they do this? Is she still alive?"

"Weep not for me, child. Stone they made me and stone I am, eternal and unfeeling. And I shall endure 'til the Maker returns to light their fires again."

"What does that mean?" Lenore asked.

Jowan threw up his hands. "Ambiguous rubbish. It could mean anything." He shook his head. "I can do it too: The sun goes dark, but lo! Here comes the dawn!"

"Stop talking to it," Lily pleaded. "Please, both of you."

Reluctantly, Lenore pulled herself away from the statue. "Yes, we have much to do."

Lily pulled Jowan's arm. "Come on, Jowan. Let's go."

Lenore looked at a small statue of a dog. "I've heard of

these," she said, smiling. "They amplify any spell cast into them."

Jowan blinked, then practically skipped over to where she was standing. "Are you saying we should use it to amplify a spell and break our way into the chamber?" He lowered his hands and his face became dejected. "But the door is warded. No magic will work."

"We won't use it on the door. Look at that wall over there." Lenore gestured, then walked to the bookcase, and took a closer look.

She gestured to Jowan. He came to stand beside her. "It should be pretty easy to get this out of the way."

Lenore took a step back and gave Jowan a teasing smile. "All right, Jowan, move the bookcase aside."

He gave her an exasperated look. "I can't do it on my own! You have to help me."

She shook her head as she came to stand next to him. It took both of them, with some assistance from Lily, to shift the bookcase. Lenore gestured for the others to stand clear, then held the rod of fire to the cannon. It took only a few seconds to break through the wall and into the phylactery chamber. Jowan rushed in excitedly and began looking around.

Lenore strode into the room a few paces behind. She went up the stairs and caught sight of the apprentice cabinet. After a

moment, her eyes fell upon one that matched the description. "That's my phylactery! You found it! I can't believe this tiny vial stands between me and freedom." He picked it up. "So fragile, so easy to just be rid of it... to end its hold over me..." He let the vial slip from his fingers and shatter on the stone floor. "...and I am free."

Lily and Lenore exchanged happy smiles. "Then let us move," Lenore said.

"I do not want to stay here a moment longer," Lily said, pulling Jowan's arm eagerly."

#

Jowan hugged them both excitedly as they made their way back down the corridor. "We did it! I can't believe it! Thank you... we could never have -" His face fell as they left the chamber, and he saw the men waiting for them.

Greagoir folded his arms. "So what you said was true, Irving." Next to him, Irving shook his head in disappointment.

Lenore swallowed. "This looks bad."

Lily held out an entreating hand. "G-Greagoir."

His face was carved from stone. "An initiate, conspiring with a blood mage. I'm disappointed, Lily." He stepped forward, peering into her eyes. "She seems shocked, but fully in control of her own mind. Not a thrall of the blood mage, then. You

were right, Irving. The initiate has betrayed us. The Chantry will not let this go unpunished." His cold gaze fell on Lenore. "And this one, newly a mage, and already flouting the rules of the circle."

"I'm disappointed in you," Irving said. She met his eyes. "You could have told me what you knew of this plan, and you didn't."

Beside her, Jowan shook his head and threw up a hand. "You don't care for the mages! You just bow to the Chantry's every whim!"

"Jowan, please don't make it worse." Lenore put a hand on his shoulder, and he jerked away from her.

Greagoir put a hand to his sword. "Enough! As knight-commander of the Templars here assembled, I sentence this blood mage to death. And this initiate has scored the Chantry and her vows. Take her to Aeonar."

Lily drew back. "The... the mages' prison. No... please, no. Not there!"

Lenore's eyes widened in horror as Jowan drew his blade across his palm. "No! I won't let you touch her!" Magic, tinged red with his blood, flowed out, knocking the men off their feet. He turned to Lily, and extended his hand. "Lily, we have to get out of here! I can't hold them for long!"

Lily looked at his hand, and stepped backwards, shaking her

head from side to side. "By the Maker... blood magic! H-how could you? You said you never..."

Jowan's face was pale. "I admit, I... I dabbled! I thought it would make me a better mage!"

Lenore rushed to Matthias's side, her fingers glowing with healing magic as she attempted to close the wound on his head from where he'd fallen.

"Blood magic is evil, Jowan." Lily said, tears streaming down her face. "It corrupts people... changes them..."

"I'm going to give it up. All magic. I just want to be with you, Lily. Please, come with me..." Jowan begged.

Lily swung at him as he approached her. "I trusted you. I was ready to sacrifice everything for you... I... I don't know who you are, blood mage. Stay away from me..."

Jowan looked at her, then at where Lenore was healing Matthias. He shook his head, and ran.

#

Duncan glanced at the mage who ran past him before continuing into the room. Lenore was weaving a healing spell over a downed templar. As he entered, she moved next to Irving, and then finally to Greagoir. Curious, he stepped back to observe from the hallway.

#

Irving sat up. "Are you all right? Where's Greagoir?"

Lenore went to Greagoir's side, letting the healing magic flow into him. He blinked up at her, then pushed her hands away. "I knew it... blood magic. But to overcome so many... I never thought him capable of such power..." He looked at Lenore.

"He lied to me," Lenore said, shaking her head tiredly.

Irving set his hand on her shoulder. "None of us expected this. Are you all right, Greagoir?"

Greagoir climbed to his feet. "As good as can be expected under the circumstances! If you had let me act sooner, this would not have happened! Now we have a blood mage on the loose and no way to track him down!"

"Yes, Jowan destroyed his phylactery." Lenore sighed, then stood up. She rubbed her arm, and shook her head dejectedly.

Greagoir started to say something to her, then frowned and looked around. "Where is the girl?"

"I... I am here, Ser," Lily said, emerging from behind the staircase. Her face was pale and worn, as if she'd aged ten years in the past few minutes.

"You helped a blood mage!" No sympathy crossed Greagoir's face. He gestured at the men around them. "Look at all he's hurt!"

Lenore stepped between Greagoir and Lily. "Lily didn't know Jowan was a blood mage."

Behind her, Lily stepped forward and set a hand on her shoulder. "You've been a friend, but you needn't defend me any longer." She walked towards Greagoir. "Knight-Commander... I... I was wrong. I was accomplice to a... a blood mage. I will accept whatever punishment you see fit. Even..." A fresh tear traced down her cheek. "Even Aeonar."

Greagoir shook his head at her. "Get her out of my sight." His eyes went to Lenore. "And you. You know why the repository exists. Some artifacts- some magics- are locked away for a reason!"

"Did you take anything important from the repository?" Irving asked.

"No." Lenore looked from Irving to Greagoir. Her shoulders slumped. For a moment, she wished she'd run after Jowan. Then her eyes went to where Matthias was rubbing his head, and she sighed.

"But your antics have made a mockery of this Circle! Ah..." His own eyes went to Matthias, and his hand touched where his own wound had been. "What are we to do with you?"

"I had no idea he was a blood mage." She felt tears welling behind her own eyes. Jowan. Her stupid, foolish, wonderful friend. A blood mage.

"And you think this excuses you? You helped a blood mage escape. All our prevention measures for naught - because of you!"

Another voice rang through the room. "Knight-commander, if I may..." Duncan stepped into the room. "I am not only looking for mages to join the king's army. I am also recruiting for the Grey Wardens. Irving spoke highly of this mage, and I would like her to join the Warden ranks."

Irving couldn't quite hide his smile, despite his words.

"Duncan, this mage has assisted a maleficar, and shown a lack of regard for the Circle's rules."

"She's a danger. To all of us." Greagoir looked back at her, then at the warden.

"It is a rare person who risks all for a friend in need. I stand by my decision. I will recruit this mage."

"No. I refuse to let this go unpunished!" Greagoir stepped between Duncan and Lenore.

"Greagoir is right. I should face the consequences." Lenore shook her head. She still couldn't understand how she could have missed Jowan falling so far.

"Hmph. Perhaps not all our lessons have been lost. She knows her place!" Greagoir turned back to look at her. She was surprised to see sympathy in his eyes.

"Don't be a fool," Duncan said. "You have assisted a maleficar. You must know what awaits you in the Circle."

"But I haven't done anything wrong," Lenore said.

"You may think so, but others feel otherwise." His eyes went to Greagoir as he walked towards her.

"What's he doing? Stop him! You are not taking this mage away!" Greagoir held out a hand.

"You know Duncan can invoke the Right of Conscription if he wishes. We must comply." Irving was clearly trying to keep his voice steady, but Lenore could hear his relief.

Lenore blinked, not sure what was happening. "The right of what?" Then she realized.

"If the Grey Wardens wish to conscript someone, neither lord nor king can deny them."

Lenore saw Greagoir starting towards the warden, and spoke quickly to forestall him. "I would prefer to go with the Wardens voluntarily."

"Greagoir, mages are needed. This mage is needed. Worse things plague this world than blood mages - you know that. I take this young mage under my wing and bear all responsibility for her actions."

"A blood mage escapes, and his accomplice is not only unpunished, but is rewarded by becoming a Grey Warden."

"Are our rules nothing? Have we lost all authority over our mages? This does not bode well, Irving." Greagoir sighed, and yet, there was a note of relief in his voice as well.

"Enough. We have no more say in this matter," Irving said.

"So I am to be a Grey Warden?" Lenore asked.

Irving smiled at her. "Yes. Be proud, child. You are luckier than you know."

"Thank you for everything, First Enchanter." Lenore glanced towards Greagoir, and he gave her a small nod.

Duncan put his hand on her shoulder. "Come, your new life awaits."

#

Duncan kept his hand on her shoulder as he walked back towards the room to gather his things. He glanced at her. "You could have run."

She blinked up at him. "Excuse me?"

"You could have run with Jowan." He watched her face carefully.

She shook her head, then glanced back over her shoulder. "Greagoir and Mathias were hurt."

"I see," Duncan said. He smiled slightly. Saitada was standing

just outside the door. He blinked, then realized she'd already packed their things. "You heard?"

"Blood mage, demons, abominations," Saitada twitched a shoulder. "Seemed a lot of overreacting, but I had a hunch you'd be wanting to leave quickly."

"Lenore, this is Saitada, another warden." Duncan saw Saitada raise an eyebrow, and realized he'd referred to her as a warden rather than a recruit. He shrugged.

"Nice to meet you," Lenore said.

"Stone met, and blessings on your house," Saitada replied. She offered Duncan his satchel. "Shall we?"

Duncan fell into step next to Saitada. He saw Lenore slow her steps slightly. A young templar was staring at her, his face bleak. Lenore's face trembled slightly as she followed them out of the tower.

12. Chapter 12

Duncan left the other wardens at the inn when he went to seek out his old friend, Valendrian. Valendrian's note said he would come visit Duncan at the inn on the morrow, but Duncan found himself in need of a walk. He thought about inviting Saitada along, but decided her time was better spent on her recently adopted project of teaching Brosca and Harl how to read. He tried not to think about how advantageous her ordeal had proven to him, but he had to admit the wardens were incredibly fortunate to have the former princess. He found himself praying to the maker for the first time in ages, hoping to ensure the dwarf would survive the joining. Already she was proving a capable second and at times he caught himself following her lead instead of the other way around. Perhaps it was for the best. His time was approaching, and Ferelden would need a new commander.

What was the woman's name? The one he'd almost recruited some years back? Adaia Tabris. He'd heard she had a son who was following in her footsteps. Perhaps he'd come away from Denerim with another recruit.

#

Jerath felt a pillow land on his face. He grabbed it and threw it back in the direction it had come.

"Wake up, Cousin! Why are you still in bed? It's your big day!" Shianni's voice was filled with excitement.

Reluctantly, Jerath sat up. "What..." He frowned. "Why are you in my room, Shianni?"

Shianni bounced towards him, picking the pillow up as she came. "What, you're shy now? I sweet-talked your father into letting me share the good news. You do remember what today is, don't you?" She whacked him with the pillow.

Jerath stood, then sniffed. "According to your breath, it's get-drunk-before-noon day."

"No, you idiot." She hit him with the pillow again. "You're getting married today! And Soris too! That's what I came to tell you! Your bride, Nesiara... she's here early!"

"So that means we do it now? I'm not ready!" He grabbed the pillow from her as she attempted to hit him again, then tossed it onto the bed.

"Well, it's going to happen anyway, so hold your breath in! There's going to be music, decorations, feasting... wedding are so much fun! You're so lucky!" She danced around the room, swinging her arms grandly.

Jerath shook his head. "You just want to get to the drinking."

"Which won't happen until you get going, will it?" She threw a bundle of clothes at him, then waited a beat. He lifted an

eyebrow, and she laughed. "All right, I'll stop tormenting you. I should go talk to the other bridesmaids and find my dress. Oh, Soris said that he'll be waiting for you outside So move it!"

#

He wrinkled his nose at the outfit. His aunt must have spent hours on the embroidery. If only she hadn't let Shianni pick the colors. He shrugged, then got dressed and ran a comb through his hair before tying it back.

His father was waiting for him the moment he exited the room. "Good morning, my son. It's your big day." His smile was wistful. "Oh, I wish your mother could have been here!"

"Me too, Father." He tugged at the collar, then sighed. "Well, what should I be doing?"

Cyrion smiled. "All right, time for you to go find Soris. The sooner this wedding starts, the less chance you two have to escape."

"A small chance is still a chance."

Cyrion laughed. "Still have your mother's smart mouth, I see." He hesitated, then held out one hand to stop Jerath from leaving. "Oh, one last thing before you go, son. Your martial training... the swordplay, knives, and whatever else your mother trained you in. Best not to mention it to your betrothed."

Jerath frowned. "She'll find out sooner or later"

"Later. Definitely later. We don't want to seem like troublemakers, after all. Adai made that mistake."

Jerath felt the rage, and forced it down. "The humans who killed her made a bigger one."

"Our world is full of so many injustices." Cyrion handed him a pair of well-made boots. "Take this. Your mother would have wanted you to have it. It's the very least I can give you, as you start your new life. Go on, then. I still have some things to do, and Soris is no doubt waiting for you."

#

Jerath strode through the alienage. His eyes fell on one of Shianni's friends, busily packing belongings onto a small cart. He frowned, and walked in that direction. Nessa's father looked up as he approached. "Many blessings, young one. We hoped to stay for the celebration, but we must be off."

"What happened?" Jerath bent and helped him pick up one of the boxes.

"The human who owns our building has decided to sell it for storage space. We can't afford to live anywhere else here, so we're leaving Denerim."

"Where are you going?"

Nessa gave him a sad smile. "The Ostagar ruins. The army

camp there is calling for laborers."

"We wanted to look for work in Highever..." her mother started to say.

Her father interrupted. "But that's just not possible."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Nessa's father gave him an almost contemptuous look. "You're still a child. You can't do anything." He shook his head. "Enjoy your special day, and put us out of your mind."

"What my husband means is, you're very generous, but... we don't need charity to solve our problems." Nessa's mother put a hand on her husband's shoulder.

"I understand." Jerath flicked his eyes back to her husband. "Good luck to you."

"Many thanks. Again, blessings on your day," he said before turning away, dismissing Jerath entirely.

Nessa hesitated a moment, then rushed after him. "Wait... can I talk to you a moment?" Her eyes were hopeful.

"Of course." Jerath gave her a nod.

"I apologize for my parents. They're too proud to accept help, much less ask for it. My parents will labor in the army camp, and they'll expect me to do the same, but... I don't like the idea of being surrounded by human soldiers who haven't seen

a woman in months."

"Maybe you should stay here."

"I would, but my father would have to believe I have a future here..." Nessa sighed helplessly.

"Would some money help?"

"Of course, but I can't imagine anyone here has much to spare. We'd need another three silvers to make it to Highever. And if we got another ten silvers, we could rent a house here. Maybe one large enough to start a business. But... that's just dream talk. Nobody has that much money, and if they did, why would they give it to us." Nessa shook her head.

"Someone must be willing to help." Jerath frowned. Off the top of his head, he couldn't think of anyone. He felt something simmer inside. It wasn't far, how easily their lives could be disrupted. He knew he was going to help. He just didn't yet know how.

"I don't have much hope." Nessa looked back at her parents.

"Stay here. I'll be back if I can find some money."

"Well... here's hoping." Her eyes were bleak. "We'll be leaving soon, though."

#

Jerath shook his head when he saw Soris. Maybe he'd been

lucky to have Shianni choose colors for him. Clearly, it could have been much worse.

"Well, if it isn't my lucky cousin." Soris smiled down at him. "Care to celebrate the end of our independence together?"

"Getting cold feet, Soris?"

"Are you surprised? Apparently, your bride's a dream come true. Mine sounds like a dying mouse."

"Maybe you'll get a cage for a wedding present."

Soris laughed, then caught himself. "That's terrible. Let's go introduce you to your dreamy betrothed before you say 'I do'." Soris gave him a considering look. "She's got a couple years and a couple inches on you."

"Could be worse for her. She could be stuck with you."

"Yeah, just surprised Valendrian is actually going through with the wedding. I thought the idea was she'd live here for a year or so. I mean, I think you might be the youngest wedding ever performed." Soris fell into step next to him as they walked back across the alienage.

"I suppose he figured it was as easy to hold two weddings as one."

"That or she'd get a look at you and run away to find the Dalish."

"Also a possibility."

#

Ahead, they saw Shianni start to wave at them. Two unfamiliar elven women stood near her. One was brown haired, and rather mousy in appearance. The other was fair-haired and lovely. Jerath poked Soris in the side and they quickened their pace as a human man grabbed one of the wedding party.

"Let go of me! Stop, please!"

The human smirked as she got loose. "It's a party, isn't it? Grab a whore and have a good time." He laughed. "Savor the hunt, boys. Take this little elven wench, here... so young and vulnerable." He stepped towards Shianni. Jerath's fingers itched for a blade.

"Touch me and I'll gut you, you pig!" Shianni said, jerking away from him.

A man spoke up. "Please, my lord! We're celebrating weddings, here!"

"Silence, worm!"

Beside him, Soris held up a hand to try to stop Jerath's forward movement. "I know what you're thinking, but maybe we shouldn't get involved..."

Jerath looked down at his hand. "Objection noted. Now get

out of my way."

"Fine." Soris said, stepping back. He then moved to flank Jerath. "But let's try to be diplomatic, shall we?"

"What's this? The two grooms come to welcome me personally?" Vaughan looked them over.

Jerath moved to stand between the human and the women. "I'd welcome you getting what you deserve."

Vaughan scoffed at him. "Do you have any idea who I am?" He started to step towards Jerath, and then a bottle hit him in the head. He fell to the ground.

"Are you insane?" one of the other humans asked. "This is Vaughan Urien, the arl of Denerim's son!"

Shianni gasped. "W-what? Oh, Maker..."

Jerath moved to intercept the man's approach of Shianni. "Take him home. If you don't mention this, we won't."

The lord sneered down at him, but reconsidered his attempt to reach Shianni. He gestured at one of the other men, who picked up Vaughan. "You've got a lot of nerve, knife-ears. This'll go badly for you."

#

Jerath turned to where Shianni stood. She held her hands in front of her face as she stepped from side to side. "Oh, I

really messed up this time."

Soris put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It'll be all right. He won't tell anyone an elven woman took him down."

Shianni smiled. "I hope so." She looked down at herself. "I should get cleaned up." She practically fled.

Soris looked around. "Is everybody else all right?"

The mousy looking, brown haired elf woman nodded. "I think we're just shaken. What was that about?"

Soris laughed nervously. "Looks like the arl's son started drinking too early. Um, well let's not let this ruin the day." He turned to Jerath. "Uh, this is Valora, my betrothed."

Jerath gave a bow to the other woman. "Then this beautiful vision must be Nesiara."

She smiled at him, a little shyly as she looked him over. "I am lucky to finally see you with my own eyes."

Soris glanced from one to the other before moving off a little ways with Valora. "I'm... sure the two of you have a lot to discuss."

Nesiara shuffled her feet a little awkwardly. "Well, here we are..." Her face betrayed her uncertainty as she looked him over. She started to open her mouth, then closed it again. Then she asked "are you nervous?"

Jerath took her hand, then pressed his lips to the back of it. "I was until I saw you."

Her smile lit up her entire face, turning her from merely pretty into beautiful. "... I'm speechless." Her voice warmed. "I hope I'm worthy of your affection." She squeezed his hand gently. "My stomach was in knots the whole way here."

"How was the trip from Highever?"

"Uneventful, thankfully. The trade caravan we accompanied had little of value."

"Except for you," Jerath said. She blushed. "How do you feel about moving to Denerim?"

"It was hard to leave Highever, but your father's matchmaker spoke highly of you." She gazed at him through slightly downcast eyes. "And rightfully so. You're... younger, than I expected."

Jerath chuckled. "That problem will take care of itself in time." He brushed a lock of hair away from her face. "Maybe I won't be running off to seek the Dalish after all."

She laughed. "Oh! You're a rascal, aren't you? I imagine I'm going to have my hands full."

"Things can only get better," he said. He hoped that were true, at least. Neither of them had a lot of choice in this matter. Making her smile seemed the very least he could do

after she'd given up her home.

"Being here with you, I feel the same. I'm looking forward to seeing how life unfolds."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Soris shake his head. "Come on, Cousin. We should let them get ready."

Valora smiled. "We'll see you two in a bit. Don't disappear on us."

Nesiara released Jerath's hand a bit reluctantly. "Or we'll hunt you down." She laughed.

#

Soris elbowed him. "Had to show me up, didn't you, cousin?" He shook his head, and looked back towards the women. Valora was engrossed in conversation with one of the bridal party. Nesiara, on the other hand, kept sneaking peeks at Jerath, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Not my fault you know nothing about women," Jerath said as they walked towards the other side of the alienage square.

"I know nothing about women?" Soris shook his head, then smirked. "You're twelve."

Jerath shot him a look. "Fifteen."

"Midget."

"Oaf."

"Shrimp."

"Ass."

They threw a few more insults at each other before Soris frowned. "Don't look now, but we have another problem."

Jerath turned to see what had caught Soris's eye. "Is it Vaughan? Has he returned?"

"Another human just walked in. Could be one of Vaughan's or just a random troublemaker." He narrowed his eyes. The man near the alienage gate was armed and armored, abet unusually for the area.

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "Right. Let's go talk to him."

"Let's do this quickly."

#

In his ruminations, he almost didn't notice the two elves move to stand in front of him. They were well dressed, and Duncan briefly remembered it being mentioned a wedding was taking place. He smiled and gave a polite bow. "Good day. I understand congratulations are in order for your impending wedding."

The smaller of the two elves, a black haired boy, returned the bow with a polite nod. "Thanks, but please go. I'd rather avoid

any unpleasantness."

Duncan found himself amused. The elf standing before him could easily have been mistaken for a child, even among other elves. He doubted the boy could have been much older than sixteen, and yet apparently possessed of enough confidence to confront a fully armed human politely. "What manner of unpleasantness might you be referring to?"

The young elf shrugged. "The Alienage just isn't a good place for humans to be."

Duncan thought about introducing himself, but decided to let the situation play out. There was something vaguely familiar about the boy, and he was beginning to get an inkling. "I'm sorry, but I have no intention of leaving."

The young man shifted his stance slightly, adjusting his weight. "I will ask once more, politely. Please leave."

"And I refuse, yet again. Now what?"

The young man shifted again, slightly. Duncan realized that subtly, the boy was assuming a combat stance. "I'm not backing down. This is no place for you."

Duncan gave a polite warning. "Surely it has not escaped your notice that I am both armed and armored. Any fight between us would be rather one-sided."

The young elf let his gaze trail over Duncan's gear, as if

noticing it for the first time. "Do you intend on using that weapon?"

Duncan responded calmly, "Not unless I'm left without a choice."

The boy nodded, more to himself than anything. "You're not staying, armed or not," he said. Dark green eyes met Duncan's deep brown. He saw something behind those eyes, and for a moment, found himself wondering if he wasn't the one in over his head.

The expression on the other elf's face was slowly growing more and more panicked. At the boy's last comment, the other elf said quickly, "Try not to die; I'll run for help!"

Duncan raised a calming hand as he observed another approaching. "No need, I am not here to fight you. Still, I find such bravery most impressive... do you not agree, Valendrian?"

The elderly elf gave a pointed look to the two younger elves. "I would say the world has far more use of those who know how to stay their blades." The taller of the young elves looked abashed, while the smaller simply shifted out of the combat stance smoothly enough that Duncan doubted the elder even noticed. "It is good to see you again, my old friend. It has been far too long."

The taller of the two younglings was starting to look as though he wished the ground would swallow him up. The smaller

nodded to Valendrian before giving Duncan a polite bow. "I am sorry. I had no idea."

Duncan returned the gesture. "I was hardly forthcoming, and for that I apologize."

Valendrian quickly made introductions. "May I present Duncan, head of the Grey Wardens in Ferelden."

Jerath nodded. "Well met, Duncan."

Duncan smiled. "And you, lad."

Valendrian gave the elf boy a nod of approval before turning back to Duncan. "But my question remains unanswered. Why are you here, Duncan?"

Duncan answered grimly. "The worse has happened: A Blight has begun. King Cailan summons the Grey Wardens to Ostagar to fight the darkspawn horde alongside his armies."

Valendrian shifted uncomfortably. "Yes... I had heard the news. Still, this is an awkward time. There is to be a wedding - two, in fact."

Duncan glanced over at the boy again. There was something about him. Though young, he would have made a fine recruit. Still, with three other recruits in his party, two already on their way to Ostagar, and Ser Gilmore waiting in Highever, he could leave the boy. "So I see. By all means, attend to your ceremonies. My concerns can wait, for now." He said

reassuringly.

There was still an undertone of worry to Valendrian's response. "Very well. Children, treat Duncan as my guest. And for the Maker's sake, take your places."

"Please, do not let me interrupt further. We shall speak more later." Duncan watched the elves go. The boy hung back from the others a few paces.

Duncan smiled. "Was there something else?"

Jerath nodded. "I have some questions."

Duncan raised an eyebrow. "By all means."

"How do you know the elder?"

"Valendrian and I have known each other for almost twenty years... since the time I tried to recruit your mother, in fact." Duncan responded, a trace of amusement entering his voice.

"You tried recruiting my mother?" Jerath asked, his tone startled.

Duncan smiled fondly in memory. "I did. Your mother was a fiery woman. She would have made an excellent Grey Warden," he finished, a bit regretfully.

"But she didn't join," Jerath responded curiously.

Duncan sighed. "I never made the offer. Valendrian convinced

me that it was better for her to remain here with her family. As there was no Blight and thus no immediate need for recruits, I deferred to his wishes. But it seems she passed her training on to you, am I right?"

Jerath nodded. "Until she died."

"So I heard. I am very sorry for your loss. I have already heard a great deal about you, if you must know. But we can speak more of this later. You have a wedding to attend."

The young man gave him a nod of farewell before rejoining his friend.

#

Jerath gestured for Soris to wait a moment, then walked to where Nessa was checking the knots on the cart. She looked up and caught his eye, then called over her shoulder. "I'll be right back, Father."

Her father frowned. "Be quick. We've packing to do."

"So... any news?" she asked Jerath hopefully.

Jerath held out a hand. "Here's ten silvers. Take it. Stay here where you belong."

She held out her hand almost by reflex, and he poured the coins into her palm. "W-where did you get this much money? Never mind, I'm sure not talking you out of this. Thank you! Thank you so much! You saved my family - I love you! Now I

just have to handle the parents..."

He nodded, then turned back to where Soris was waiting. Soris gave a low whistled. "Where did you get that money?"

"Old elven proverb - Nobles who start fights should keep better eye on coinpurses"

"You... tell me you didn't pickpocket the Grey Warden!" Soris's eyes were wide.

Jerath gave him an irritated look. "I don't pickpocket friends of the elder." He shrugged, then lifted the corner of his mouth in a small smile. "I nicked from the one that carted Vaughan off."

"I can't believe you did that." Soris tried to inject a note of disapproval into his voice, but failed.

Jerath held out the small silk bag. "Are you saying you don't want your wedding present?" He rotated the bag from side to side.

Soris grinned. "Now now, let's not be too hasty." He accepted the bag, then looked around nervously. He shook his head, then broke into a laugh. "Wow. Um... okay."

"Okay."

"Yeah. Okay."

"In a couple hours, we are going to have wives."

"Maker. Is it too late to run?"

#

Duncan watched the boy hand over the coins and quickly checked his coinpurse. It was still there, and he found himself idly wondering whose pocket, exactly, the boy had picked. He thought back to meeting Adaia. The woman had been a cunning warrior, one that had fought in the rebellion in spite of her young age. She'd a natural gift for the blade, but it had been clear she was already in love with the young man Valendrian had arranged for her to marry. He smiled, amused that Valendrian had repeated the same ploy with the son. Still, it appeared from the way the bride was smiling at Jerath that this marriage also had potential.

He thought about returning to the inn with the others. Saitada was more than capable of keeping an eye on the others. If she survived the joining, and Duncan sent a silent prayer to the Maker on that note, he intended to begin training her to take the roll of his second. Perhaps by the time he went to his Calling, she'd be ready to assume the position of Commander of the Grey.

13. Chapter 13

They walked over to where the wedding party was gathering on the platform. Soris walked up the stairs first, glancing back once to make sure Jerath was actually following. Valora smiled. "Ooh! Soris! There you are. I was afraid you'd run off."

"No, I'm here, fellow groom in tow!"

Nesiara smiled as Jerath moved to stand next to her. "Good. I'm so pleased to finally do this!"

Soris exhaled. "It looks like everyone's ready."

"Good luck, Soris," Jerath said, winking at Valora.

"Perhaps it won't be so tragic, after all," Soris said.

Jerath saw Valora and Nesiara exchange an eyeroll. Nesiara caught him looking, and smiled shyly. She touched his hand lightly, and he curled his fingers around hers as Valendrian started to speak. "Friends and family, today we celebrate not only this joining, but also our bonds of kin and kind. We are a free people, but that was not always so. Andraste, the Maker's prophet, freed us from the bonds of slavery. As our community grows, remember that our strength lies in

commitment to tradition and to each other." He stepped down.

Mother Boann took her place. "Thank you, Valendrian. Now, let us begin. In the name of the Maker, who brought us into this world, and in whose name we say the Chant of Light, I-" She was interrupted as armed men began to walk to the platform. "Milord? This is... an unexpected surprise."

Vaughan stepped out from behind his guards. "Sorry to interrupt, Mother, but I'm having a party and we're dreadfully short of female guests." He laughed.

"Milord, this is a wedding!" Boann protested.

"Ha! If you want to dress up your pets and have tea parties, that's your business. But don't pretend this is a proper wedding. Now, we're here for a good time, aren't we boys?"

His two companions joined him in laughing. "Just a good time with the ladies, that's all."

Vaughan began to point to women. "Let's take those two, the one in the tight dress, and... where's the bitch that bottled me?"

"Over here, Lord Vaughan!" He grabbed Shianni.

"Let me go, you stuffed-shirt son of a -"

"Oh, I'll enjoy taming her. And see the pretty bride..." Vaughan stepped forward.

"What do we do?" Soris whispered.

"Soris, they're taking the women!" Jerath stepped between Vaughan and Nesiara.

Vaughan sneered down at him. "Ah yes... the uppity runt that thinks he's worthy of speaking to me. Don't worry. I'll return whatever's left in time for the 'honeymoon'."

Jerath felt the rage beating at him, and forced it down. Not here. He focused his eyes on Vaughan as he fought to keep it from escaping. He heard Nesiara gasp just before something struck him from behind.

#

He woke to find Soris standing over him. "Can you hear me, Cousin? Are you all right?"

Jerath looked around. He stood quickly enough to feel a moment of dizziness. "The women... are they all right?"

Soris shook his head. "Vaughan took Shianni, Nesiara, Valora, and the rest of the women in the wedding party back to the palace. The elder is talking to Duncan, that Grey Warden. Everyone is getting upset."

"We should see how we can help."

"That sounds dangerous. Let's see what they're talking about."

#

Valendrian held up his hands in a calming gesture. "Please, all of you, listen. I know you are upset, and with good reason... but there is nothing we can do right now."

Elva's querulous voice rose over the rest of the crowd. "He's right. Running after them will just make matters worse."

"So we do nothing? They took my sister!"

Jerath pushed his way through the crowd. "Where are the women now?"

Valendrian gave him a sympathetic look. "They were taken to the arl's palace, I suspect. Normally, I'd counsel patience. Unfortunately, stories about the arl's son and his appetites are... most disturbing."

Jerath shook his head. He knew the stories. "Then we need to do something. Now."

"But what can we do?" another elf asked. "We're talking about the arl's palace. Even with the arl and his knights gone, it'll be guarded."

Another voice spoke up. "Elder, may I offer a suggestion? I work inside the palace. I could sneak one, perhaps two others in through the servant's entrance. Nobody would notice an extra pair of elves looking around."

Jerath spoke quickly, before Valendrian could offer an

objection. "We could be in and out before anyone knows the difference."

Behind him, Soris spoke. "I'm with you, of course- but if we run into trouble, we won't be able to talk our way out."

He saw the Gray Warden give him a considering look, then the man nodded. "For that, you will need weapons. Allow me to offer you my own longsword and bow. A man should be able to defend his loved ones properly."

"Thank you, Duncan."

Valendrian closed his eyes for a moment, then his shoulders slumped in resignation. "Then your path is set. I pray the Maker looks on it with favor."

"You're all insane! The guards will burn our homes down around us!" Elva said.

"Enough, Elva." Valendrian's voice became firm. "You've had your say. They shall try, for their own honor and the honor of the women. We must trust in the Maker."

The servant moved over to where Jerath and Soris were standing. He gave Jerath a quick nod. "I'll make sure the way is clear. When you're ready, meet me at the Alienage gate."

#

Duncan removed his scabbard and offered it to the boy. "Are you prepared for what you're about to do?"

Jerath took the scabbard, and belted it around his waist. Duncan noted that he positioned it correctly, hilt forward for an easy draw. "I think so, but I have questions."

"Anything I can answer, I shall," Duncan said. The crossbow he offered to the other elf. He caught the man's rather intimidated look, and quickly began to demonstrate the loading mechanism.

"Do you know anything about Vaughan?"

Duncan frowned. "His father is a decent enough man but no friend to the Grey Wardens. Rumors say Vaughan is far too wild, and a poor heir."

"How is he in a fight?"

A good question, Duncan thought to himself. He considered a moment. "I have seen the lad in tournaments and he does know his way with a blade. I have never seen him in real combat, however."

"Will you tell me now why you came here?"

Duncan looked at him, then nodded. "To find recruits." Perhaps honesty was best. "I had hoped to speak to you, but your elder outmaneuvered me. I suspect this is why your wedding was moved forward: in hopes that I might let you remain. Valendrian did the same thing when I came to recruit your mother."

The boy blinked. "My mother was that skilled?"

"She was indeed. And it appears she has passed her skills on to you. See to the task at hand. We can speak of your future later." Duncan watched the boy walk away. He shook his head slightly. It was likely the two young men were going to get themselves killed. For a heartbeat, he considered telling them to wait while he fetched the others from the inn. Then he shook his head again. Such an intervention would cause more problems than it solved.

He heard the boy ask Valendrian about moving the wedding forward. Valendrian confirmed his suspicions. The boy nodded, then assured Valendrian that he understood before walking towards the alienage gate, followed by his older companion. Valendrian watched them go, then walked to where Duncan was standing.

"They don't stand a chance, do they?" Valendrian asked him.

"Could you have stopped him?" Duncan asked.

Valendrian sighed, then shook his head. "Soris, maybe. I need to tell Cyrion." He wrung his hands. "Maker watch over them."

Silently, Duncan echoed the prayer.

#

Jerath handed Soris the crossbow, and gave him a concerned look. "Are you going to be alright?"

Soris swallowed. "Think I'll let you go in first."

"Just stay behind me, take what shots you can."

Soris nodded. "Okay. I'm with you, cousin."

"I know."

Jerath gave the servant a nod. He handed Jerath the key, then vanished back into the gardens. Jerath unlocked the door, then stepped cautiously inside. A chair held a slumbering guard. He gestured for Soris to stay back, then drew the dagger from his sleeve before catching the guard's hair and yanking his head back. He pressed the dagger against the guard's throat.

"Mmph... mmwa? What's going on?" The guard swallowed as he became aware of the knife at his throat. His eyes widened as his gaze went to Jerath's ears.

Inside, Jerath could feel the rage starting to build. For the first time in a year, he let a bit of it out. "I have questions," he said.

The guard started to open his mouth, then he met Jerath's eyes. Fear flooded his face as he caught a glimpse of what lay behind them. "Uh... understood"

"Vaughan brought some elf maidens here. Where are they?"

"I, uh, think they're in a holding room, just west of here."

"Tell me about the castle's layout."

"Well, this is the, uh, guard's corner. The kennel and trophy room are southeast and Vaughan's chambers are northeast."

"Thanks for the help. Now it's time to shut you up."

" I cooperated! Don't kill me!"

Rage beat against the walls inside. Jerath nodded. There was a price. There was always a price. His voice was soft. "I never promised anything."

"Please, wait!" The guard's plea was silence by Jerath's knife slicing halfway through his neck. He slid to the floor, mouth working silently as blood pumped from the wound. He was still a few moments later.

Behind him, Jerath heard frank admiration in Soris's voice. "That was cold, Cousin."

The rage beat slower now. He set a hand on the borrowed longsword, and opened the door.

#

They entered a kitchen. Jerath started to just walk through, but the cook looked up. "You, there! Who are you? Speak quick, worms, before I call the guards and they clip your nasty ears!"

Jerath pulled the rage back. The cook was unarmed. "Just passing through. Don't mind us."

"Don't talk to me like that, scum, or I'll have the life beaten out of you! You understand? Wait, why are you dressed like that? You're bandits! Rebels! Outlaws! The guards will make quick work of...unnnnggggghhh" The man slid to the floor as the kitchen servant clocked him on the back of the head.

"You have no idea how long that shem's had it coming." The servant gave them an easy smile.

Jerath gave a respectful nod. "I'm Jerath. This is Soris."

"Well met. I'm Adwen, the cook's assistant. A friend of a friend said you'd be coming. They took the women you're looking for to Lord Vaughan's quarters. You should hurry. He is not known for his... kindness. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm getting out of here before the storm hits."

#

Jerath grabbed a small bottle off the table, then walked to the tray that contained a pitcher. He looked at the label on the bottle, then poured it into the pitcher. Soris raised an eyebrow, then smiled as Jerath picked up the tray before walking into the next room.

Several guards were playing cards. One looked up. "You there, elf! I need another drink. Anyone else?" A few other voices spoke up, and the guard looked at Jerath. "What are you waiting for? Get us those drinks! I'll blacken your eye if you don't move your arse."

"I have your drinks right here."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Would you prefer I pour, or answer?" Jerath set the tray down, and picked up the pitcher.

"Don't give me your back-talk, knife-ear! Pour and get out."

Jerath kept his face an expressionless mask as he filled the mugs. The guards began drinking almost before he was done pouring.

"Ungh - That's a nasty kick there. Drink up boys; it'll put hair on your chest."

One of the guards began to cough. "Nasty kick, indeed. I feel like -"

Another looked at the blood he'd just coughed onto the back of his hand. "What's in here, you little... rat-" He almost made it to his feet as Jerath set the pitcher down.

"Nice work! Now, let's go before anyone comes." Soris followed Jerath out of the room as the guards lay, twitching and dying on the stone floor.

#

Their luck didn't hold. A guard saw them and drew his sword before they'd made it more than a few steps down the hall. Behind him, Jerath heard Soris gulp. He drew the blade

Duncan had loaned him, and let the rage rise. He parried the guard's blow easily, then lifted the swords up enough to enable him to plunge the dagger up under the guard's ribs. Blood gushed as he pulled the dagger back out, and the guard crumbled. He saw Soris's eyes widen as he bent down and helped himself to the guard's sword. Doors began to open, and he found himself smiling as he moved forward, a blade in each hand.

He had to turn away from the room that held only a cowering servant. Soris's attention was still on the room with the caged dogs. He didn't see the way Jerath had started to raise his blade on the unarmed woman. Jerath let out the breath, forcing part of the rage back down. He couldn't lose control. Not here. Not yet. He jerked his head at Soris, and they moved on.

He could hear voices ahead, and felt the rage start to beat again when they got close enough to hear the words. "Well, that's one less elf breeder in the world."

"A shame, though. Nice body on that one."

"She's still warm. How picky are you, anyway?"

He glanced back to see Soris had gone pale. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened the door. Two guards, and a man in better armor stood over the body of Nola. Blood was spreading from beneath her head.

"Shut it, you two. We've got company. You just walked into

the wrong room. You know how this works, boys. No witnesses."

His heart was beating in time with the rage now. He blocked the blow from the first guard, and saw surprise on the larger man's face. The second blade came up, slicing through the leather and into the flesh. The guard collapsed as thick, slimy ropes began to spill from his midsection. The second guard hesitated. It was a fatal mistake. Jerath flicked the offhand blade, and when the guard swung to block it, he sent the other sword across the man's neck. He felt only a slight resistance from the man's spine. Easy. The guard's head tumbled from his shoulders. Too easy. He felt a moment's relief that his companion knew little of combat.

He stepped around Nola's body as the captain raised a shield. Jerath feinted left, then came around as the guard moved. He drew the blade across the back of the man's thighs, biting deep into muscle, flesh, and tendon. The guard pitched forward, and Jerath let him fall before stepping forward to drive the sword through the man's back, piercing his heart.

The crossbow twanged as Soris put the disemboweled man out of his misery. "They... they killed her! I can't believe this!" His voice rose slightly in pitch, and Jerath could see his hands were starting to shake.

"We need to save the others!"

Soris nodded, then looked down at his hands. He swallowed, then reloaded the crossbow with steadier hands. "Then we

should hurry. A few moments could make the difference!"

#

Jerath had to force himself to look away from the praying servant woman. He strode instead to the door, then pulled it open. Shianni was on the ground, her clothing torn. Rage.

"My, my. What have we here?" Vaughan said.

His companion smirked. "Don't worry; we'll make short work of these two."

"Quiet, you idiot! They're covered with enough blood to fill a tub. What do you think that means?" Vaughan put a hand on his blade.

Jerath's voice was cold. "You're going to pay for what you've done!"

"All right, let's not be too hasty here." The shem was still talking. Shianni was laying on the ground, her clothing torn, tears staining her face. And the shem kept talking. "Surely we can talk this over..."

"No, I really don't think we can." Was that his voice?

"Bah! I always regret talking to knife-ears! Now I'll just gut your ignorant carcasses, instead!" Vaughan went for his sword, the others a step behind.

Jerath didn't bother with a parry. He kicked the side of

Vaughan's knee, and the offhand blade swung in an arc as Vaughan fell. The body twitched and jerked as the head rolled across the room. One. The borrowed longsword impaled the lord's chest before the lord's own sword had cleared the scabbard. Two. He ripped the blade out, sending a spray of blood into the face of the third man. The last lord started to hold up his hands. Jerath severed one as he flicked the blade across the man's throat. Three.

The crossbow twanged again, sending an unnecessary bolt into the man's stomach. Soris's face was almost green as he panted. "He... he's dead. Tell me we did the right thing, Cousin."

Rage simmered, sated. "Of course."

Soris nodded. "I hope you're right.. I... I'll check the back room for the others. Shianni needs you."

#

Jerath set the blades down as he knelt next to Shianni. He searched for words, but none came. She grabbed his arm. "Don't leave me alone... please... please, take me home." Her voice trailed off into sobs.

He started to lay a hand on her shoulder, then stopped himself. "Can you walk?"

She looked at his hand, then took it and let him pull her to her feet. "I... I think so... You killed them, didn't you? You killed

them all."

"Not just them." He met her eyes. "All the humans who hurt you."

Her smile was vicious. "Good. Good..."

Valora was the first to emerge from the other room. "Is... she going to be all right?"

Jerath saw the tiny shake of Shianni's head. He understood, and forced his voice to be calm. "She's all right." He looked back at the door. "Where is Nesiara?"

Her voice answered as she came in. "I'm fine. Your friend..." She took in Shianni's appearance, and grabbed a cloak from a hook on the wall as she came towards them. "...got the worst of it. They said they were saving us for later." She looked at him, eyes wide. A trembling smile came to her face. "I can't believe you came for me."

He touched the side of her face. "I couldn't just let them hurt you."

"Thank you." Her eyes were full of emotion, and he felt a pang. It wasn't over yet.

Soris spoke up. "Er... we should go. Soon. As in now."

Jerath tore his eyes away from Nesiara's face. "Good thought."

Soris reloaded the crossbow. "I'll take the rear guard. I can't wait to leave this place."

14. Chapter 14

Valendrian paced back and forth across his porch. "I pushed this celebration too quickly. I should have been more subtle, and Vaughn never would have gotten wind of anything."

"You were trying to protect that boy, from me," Duncan said.

"Yes, alright, yes. I figured if he was already married to that lovely young woman, he wouldn't get griffins in his eyes."

"He's got fire in him."

"Aye, that he does. His mother did as well. It got her killed. Now, it may have done the same to him." Valendrian sighed. "Jerath is a good lad, and his father is one of my dearest friends. Maker, he's just a boy." He poured a cup of tea for Duncan, then one for himself. "Is it true then, there is a blight coming?"

"Darkspawn are already beginning to gather in numbers greater than we've seen in centuries."

Valendrian sighed. "It's hard enough in the alienage during peace time."

"We have warning this time. Perhaps we can stop the blight before it truly gets underway."

"I hope you are right, old friend." He looked up as elves began to chatter. "They are back."

#

Duncan followed Valendrian towards the newly arrived group.

"You have returned." Valendrian took in the sight before him. "Has Shianni been hurt? Where is Tormey's daughter, Nola?"

Valora shook her head, and tears started to fall from her eyes. "Nola didn't make it. She resisted and..." She pressed a hand to her mouth.

"...they killed her," Shianni finished.

"I see," Valendrian said. He looked at the boys. "Would you ladies please take Shianni home? She needs rest."

Nesiara sent a look at Jerath before replying. "Of course." She put an arm around Shianni's shoulder, then gently led her away.

Valendrian waited until they were gone. "Now tell me: what happened?"

"Vaughan's dead," Jerath said.

"Then the garrison could already be on their way," Duncan said. "You have little time."

"We may need to leave Denerim for a while," Jerath said.

"Ahh, it has come to this!" Valendrian glanced at Duncan.

"The guards are here!" someone shouted.

"Don't panic," Valendrian said. He looked to Soris before walking towards the guards. "Let's see what comes of this."

"I seek Valendrian, elder and administrator of the Alienage!" the leader of the guards called out.

Valendrian pushed his way to the front of the crowd. "Here, Captain. I take it you have come in response to today's disruption?" He kept his voice calm.

The captain sneered. "Don't play ignorant with me, elder. You will not prevent justice from being done. The arl's son lies dead in a river of blood that runs through the entire palace!" Duncan's head came up slightly, and he looked at the two boys. Soris's face was green, but Jerath merely stood there calmly. "I need names, and I need them now!"

The crowd started to murmur. Jerath stepped forward. "It was my doing."

Duncan saw Valendrian close his eyes for a moment before turning to look at the boy. The guard captain scoffed. "You expect me to believe one man did all that?"

"We are not all so helpless, Captain." Valendrian's quiet voice held a note of anger.

The captain gave Jerath an appraising look. "You save many

by coming forward. I don't envy your fate, but I applaud your courage." He raised his voice. "This elf will wait in the dungeons until the arl returns. The rest of you, back to your houses!"

Duncan stepped forward. "Captain... a word, if you please."

"What is it, Grey Warden? The situation is well under control, as you can see."

Duncan smiled. "Be that as it may, I hereby invoke the Grey Warden's Right of Conscription. I remove this prisoner into my custody."

Jerath gave him a startled look. "You can do that?"

The guard captain growled in frustration. "Son of a tied down-" He swallowed the rest of his curse. "Very well, Grey Warden; I cannot challenge your rights, but I'll ask one thing: Get this elf out of the city. Today."

"Agreed," Duncan said amiably.

"Now, I need to get my men on the streets before this news hits. Move out!"

Duncan turned to Jerath. "You're with me now. Say your goodbyes, and see me when you're ready. We leave immediately."

"Understood."

"Do not take long. I agreed to have you out of the city forthwith."

Soris managed, with some effort, to scrape his jaw off the ground. "Thank you. You really saved my hide back there..."

"I did what was right."

"As you always do." Soris squared his shoulders. "Well, I'd like to follow your example. No more daydreaming, I'm settling down. Valora's a good woman, and she has ideas on making life better for everyone here. Your father had the women take Shianni back to your place. Will you see here before you go?"

"Of course."

"Good luck, Cousin. You've been my hero since we were kids. It's just official, now." Soris watched the younger man walk away, then looked at Duncan. He blinked suddenly, then touched the crossbow at his side as though just remembering it was there. "Um... this is yours."

Duncan accepted it, then the quiver of bolts. He noted that very few were missing. "What happened in there?"

Soris shook his head. "He killed them. There must have been thirty guards. I think I killed one. Well, three, but two were just finishing off ones that were already dying." He looked up at Duncan. "I've seen him practice. Spar a little. This was the first time I actually saw him fight." A trace of defiance entered his eyes. "The wardens are lucky to have him."

"We are," Duncan replied.

#

Jerath stood before the door for a moment. The rage was behind the wall again, but he could feel it still. The wall twisted and shifted. He'd stretched it too far, believing that the sacrifice would be worthwhile. It was somewhat daunting to learn that he was apparently going to live. He put his hand on the door, then stepped inside.

His father was waiting, staring into the fireplace. He turned as Jerath walked towards him. "If... this is what the Maker has planned for you, then I guess it's for the best."

"You're not pleased?"

"I just wish there was another way. I dreamed of grandchildren, family gatherings, and..." He sighed. "I'm sorry. This isn't helping. Take care, my son. Be strong. And wise. And..." His voice started to break. "Well, you know. We'll all miss you."

Jerath managed a smile. "Look after Soris for me?"

"Of course."

Jerath hesitated, then walked towards the next room. Valora met him at the door. "There you are... Nesiara, your betrothed has returned!"

"I'll be right there."

Valora hesitated a moment, then threw her arms around him. Jerath tensed, then let her hug him. "Thank you..." she said as she released him. "For me, for Soris, for everything. I'll never be able to repay you." She looked over as Nesiara entered. "Well, I'll leave you two alone."

Nesiara's eyes glistened. "Thank you, Valora. What happens now? Your father said you're becoming a Grey Warden... You're leaving, aren't you?"

"I'll be back for you."

Nesiara shook her head. "No, you won't. The Grey Wardens can't have wives or family." A tear made its way down her cheek.

Jerath closed his eyes, then reopened them. "Nesiara, I'm sorry."

She shook her head, then injected a note of cheer into her voice. "For what? Saving my life? Being selected for one of the world's most noble callings?" She held out a hand, and he took it. "I'll be all right. Maybe Valora and I will start a business." I guess we'll never know what might have been." She leaned forward, and kissed him softly. Then she let go of his hand. "Your..." her voice hitched slightly. "Friend is waiting. Be safe out there."

She walked in the direction Valora had gone. He inhaled, then entered the room. Shianni was sitting on the bed. She looked up at him. "You took all the responsibility for what happened.

You're amazing, you know that?"

"I just did what had to be done."

"You always do. They'll write legends about you someday. When the world was at its worst, there you came - fire in your eyes, like something out of a storybook. I'll never forget that." She sighed. "I love you, Cousin. Make us proud out there."

"I love you too, Shianni." He picked up a pillow, and tossed it at her. "Enough with the mushy stuff!"

"Silly man." She hefted the pillow threateningly. "Then get going, already!"

#

Valendrian was waiting for him as he left the house. "Well, I guess Duncan got his recruit after all."

"It was not by my choice." He left it at that. There was no need to tell Valendrian that he'd not intended to survive the day.

"No?" Valendrian asked. He shook his head. "Either way, it's out of my hands now. If you'll excuse me, I must tend to our people. Goodbye, young one, and Maker keep you."

#

Duncan watched Jerath return from saying farewell. The young man had fully accepted that he was most likely going to

die the moment he spoke up, absolving his friend and the women of any action. That took courage. And yet the young man didn't seem to be basking in the hero's treatment the other elves were giving him. He looked like a man who had done what was needed, and accepted the cost. Like a warden.

Duncan gave the young man a moment before asking, "Are you ready to go?"

Jerath nodded. "I am."

"Good. We will need to pick up the others before we leave."

Jerath nodded, and fell into step beside him. As they walked out of the Alienage, Jerath started to hand back the sword. Duncan shook his head. "You keep that. Where we are going, you are going to need it."

Jerath nodded, and put the scabbard back on his hip.

"Was that your plan, from the beginning?"

"Pardon?"

"You knew the guards would come. Was stepping forward your plan from the beginning?"

"The women are safe. Soris is safe. The Alienage has one less threat to worry about. One life seems a small price to pay for all that."

Duncan nodded. There was something the boy was leaving unsaid. He shook his head, and decided it did not matter. "That it does. Of course, you should refrain, in the future, from issuing challenge when unarmed."

A dagger appeared in the boy's hand, and he offered it to Duncan, hilt first. Duncan blinked. "My mother said this dagger was a gift from one of the few humans for whom she held any respect," Jerath said.

Duncan took the knife, and turned it over in his hands. He recognized the inlaid griffin on the handle. "It would have been a shame to be killed by my own knife." He handed it back to the boy, and watched as it vanished once more.

#

Saitada gave Duncan a smile as he entered the inn. Alistair followed her gaze and waved, and the older man began making his way towards them. A young elf boy trailed along behind him.

Duncan gave them a nod as he approached the table. "I hate to cut your festivities short, but we must be leaving earlier than planned. Harl, you and Alistair stay here until the other wardens arrive, then head on to Ostagar. We'll catch up with you there."

"Trouble?" Saitada asked.

"Nothing to be concerned about. We will head back towards

Highever to pick up the last recruit."

Harl nodded. "We will see you at camp."

Saitada, Brosca, and Lenore returned to their rooms and packed quickly. Duncan met them at the stables, and Saitada realized the child that had been following him earlier was still there. Her eyes went to the sword at the boy's side. Brosca jerked his head at the elf boy, "who is the kid?"

"This is Jerath. He is our most recent recruit."

Saitada raised an eyebrow at Duncan as Lenore blurted out, 'but he's twelve!'

"Fifteen," the elf said quietly.

"But that's..." Lenore started to say...

"Old enough to carry a sword," Saitada interrupted. "Duncan, I got the impression we were in a hurry?"

Duncan nodded.

#

Saitada stretched her legs a bit to catch up to Duncan before matching his pace. She glanced back to make sure they were out of earshot from the others. "So, he's what, a pickpocket?"

Duncan smiled. "Among other things, yes."

"Those other things including being a child."

"He is small for his age, it makes him look somewhat younger."

"He is fifteen, he said it himself. Granted, that's old enough to carry a sword in Orzammar, but not old enough to be allowed to actually do more than drill with it. He'd need another three years before being allowed to actually join the army."

"He can handle the blade, if that's your concern."

"You know it isn't."

"I was not much older when I became a warden. I think he will surprise you." He glanced back. "He certainly surprised me."

Saitada nodded. "I suppose we can just consider him a trainee for now."

15. Chapter 15

Brehan circled the shems, coming to stand next to the other Dalish. Tamlen grinned at him. "You're just in time. I found these... humans lurking in the bushes. Bandits, no doubt."

One of the shemlen held up pleading hands. "We aren't bandits, I swear! Please don't hurt us!"

Tamlen and Brehan exchanged an amused eyeroll. "You shemlen are pathetic. It's hard to believe you ever drove us from our homeland," Tamlen said, shifting the point of his arrow towards the man who had spoken."

Another of the hunters gulped. "W-we've never done nothing to you Dalish! We didn't even know this forest was yours!"

"This forest isn't ours, fool." Tamlen tapped his forefinger against the arrow shaft. "You've stumbled too close to our camp. You shems are like vermin - - we can't trust you not to make mischief." He shot a look at Brehan. "What do you say, lethallan? What should we do with them?"

Brehan smirked. "Kill them -" He sniffed, then raised an eyebrow at Tamlen. Tamlen's lips twitched as he flicked his eyes towards the third hunter. Brehan noted wetness spreading across the man's pants. "What do I care? The

others will never know."

"I like the sound of that." Tamlem's voice betrayed his amusement. "Anything to say in your defense, shems?"

"L-look, we didn't come here to be trouble. We just found a cave." The man who had wet himself pointed towards a game trail.

"Yes, a cave! With ruins like I've never even seen! We thought there might be, uh..."

"Treasure. So you're more akin to thieves than actual bandits," Tamlen gave Brehan a sidelong glance. Brehan gave him the barest of nods. The shems were practically groveling.

"If you've been there, you should have treasure to prove it." Brehan adjusted his aim, marking each man in turn.

"I... I have proof!" one said, reaching desperately into his pocket. He pulled out a small stone tablet. "Here... we found this just inside the entrance."

Tamlen glanced at Brehan, then let down his bow and stepped forward to take the tablet while Brehan kept the men covered. He looked down at the item, and his eyes widened. He held it for Brehan to see. "This stone has carvings... Is this elfish? Written elfish?"

"There's more in the ruins!" the hunter said eagerly, pointing again towards the game trail. "We didn't get very far

though..."

"Why not?" Brehan asked, but didn't let down his bow.

"There was a demon! It was huge, with black eyes! Thank the Maker we were able to out-run it!"

Tamlen scoffed. "A demon? Where is this cave?"

"Just off to the west, I think. There's a cave in the rock face, and a huge hole just inside."

"Well? Do you trust them?" Tamlen asked Brehan. He flicked his eyes to the hunters and his lips twitched slightly. "Shall we let them go?"

Brehan gave the men a hard look, and was rewarded by renewed terror on their faces. He counted a few seconds, his bow aimed. "You've frightened them enough. They won't bother us."

"Run along then, shems... and don't come back until we Dalish have moved on."

"Of course! Thank you! Thank you!" The men practically tripped over each other in their hurry to be out of the way.

Tamlen and Brehan exchanged a look, then they both started laughing. Tamlen waved the stone tablet. "Well, shall we see if there's any truth to their story? These carvings make me curious."

He let down the bow then replaced the arrow in his quiver before returning the bow to its sling. By the time the hunters reached their village, he and Tamlen would have grown into an army of Dalish, if not into monstrous beasts of the forest.

"Sounds like a good idea."

"And if we find anything, the keeper will want to know."

Tamlen's smile was broad as he headed up the game trail.

#

"Did that shem actually wet himself?" Tamlen asked as he ducked beneath a tree branch.

"It certainly smelled that way," Brehan replied. "That was better than the time the shem tried to flee so fast he knocked himself out on the tree branch."

"That was great," Tamlen said, his laughter almost rendering his words unintelligible. He stopped suddenly. "This must be the cave. I don't recall seeing this before, do you?"

Brehan narrowed his eyes at the rent in the earth. "No, I don't." He sniffed at the air. There was something, an odor he didn't recognize, among the stale scent of long buried tomb.

"Let's check it out."

"My thoughts exactly." Tamlen moved cautiously towards the entrance, then smiled broadly back at Brehan. "With luck, we'll find something that will make us clan heroes!"

Brehan held aside the vines over the entrance then followed his friend inside.

#

They stepped over the bones of someone that had been dead long enough for time to strip away all flesh, leaving only a coat of dust to cover the skeleton. Brehan heard Tamlen gasp. "I can't believe this. You recognize this statue, don't you?"

Brehan took a closer look. "It's worn, but it looks vaguely familiar..."

"Back when our people lived in Arlathan, statues like these honored the Creators. When the shems enslaved us, much of that lore was lost. This looks like human architecture... with a statue of our people." Tamlen turned in a slow circle before looking back at him. "Can these ruins date back to the time of Arlathan?"

He let his fingers trail over the edges of the statue, and wished he'd thought to bring something to make a rubbing. "It's interesting. So much of our past is lost to us."

"I'd never have guessed that ancient elves might have lived here! With humans!" Tamlen started to point at something else then both men reached for their bows as one of the bodies strewn around the place stood up and started shambling towards them. They loosed simultaneously, and both arrows struck their mark as other corpses started to stand up.

Brehan heard a moaning sound from behind them, and turned to see more corpses moving. He gave Tamlen a nod, and then they shifted to stand back to back, drawing and firing as quickly as they could.

Tamlen's last arrow caught the last corpse in the eye, and it fell to the ground. Brehan looked around, but no other bodies got up. He began retrieving his arrows. Tamlen did the same. "Were those walking corpses? This place is haunted!" Tamlen said.

"I think we got them all," Brehan said. He elbowed Tamlen lightly. "One for the stories, eh?"

Tamlen laughed. "When you tell it around the fire later, make sure you let Merrill know about that last shot of mine."

"Lethallan, if you were any more obvious, you'd actively be drooling on her."

#

Brehan took the lead as they moved further into the cave. Behind him, Tamlen gave a low whistle. "This place makes me nervous."

"So talk, if that will calm you down," Brehan said. He bent to brush aside some dust and get a closer look at the carvings along one wall.

"I suppose so..." Tamlen said slowly. Then he kicked Brehan

lightly in the calf. "Hey, weren't you supposed to be assisting Master Varathorn today? How did you end up coming with me?"

He shrugged. "I got out of it. I prefer to hunt."

"Me too, even if you are a better hunter than I am."

"What do you think all this is?" Brehan wiped away the dust from another relief. It was so faded he had trouble telling carving from natural stone.

"I'm not sure. This looks like a very old human place. Why did they build this? And why would elven artifacts be here? Maybe some of our ancestors lived here, in caves like the dwarves." Tamlen shook his head. "I'll stick to roaming the land, myself."

He grinned up at his friend. "Why did you want to come down here so badly?"

"Aren't you curious? We could be discovering our history. Minstrels will write songs about us!"

"I am curious." He stepped over a broken piece of stone. This carving was a little more intact, but he had difficult figuring out what it was supposed to represent. Part looked to resemble a dragon, but he couldn't tell if the figures representing people were fighting it or... could they be worshipping it?

Behind him, Tamlen was still talking. "If I were to bring some

valuable ancestral artifact back to the keeper, she might forgive me for..." Tamlen trailed off, and then shrugged. "Well, you know."

Brehan felt the tips of his ears redden slightly. He'd rather not think about that particular incident. "Thanks for covering for me, by the way."

"Of course. You know I'd do anything for you." Something about Tamlen's tone made him worry about what future favor his friend was going to extract. "At any rate, I was expecting this place to... feel quite like this. Maybe this wasn't the best idea..." Tamlen fingered one of the arrows in his quiver.

"How'd you know all about the statue?"

Tamlen shrugged. "I saw a picture of it in one of those old books the keeper never lets anyone touch. It was one of the old gods. The keeper called him a 'friend of the dead'."

"'Friend of the dead'?" Brehan frowned, and mentally ran through his lore. He came up blank. "What does that mean?"

"He was a guide that took people across the spirit land to their final rest in the Beyond."

Brehan nodded. The keeper must have meant Falon'din. "Maybe this was a place of worship."

"Yet these are human ruins, remember?" Tamlen glanced back towards the statue. "Why would they worship an elven

god?"

"Perhaps this place is a tomb." If it was an honored resting place of their dead, maybe tramping about wasn't a good idea after all.

Tamlen shook his head in rejection of that idea. "An elven tomb built by shems? I doubt it. It's said that the old ones never truly died; they just went somewhere and... slept forever. And this god would come to guide their spirits away. But he wasn't an evil god, not like Fen'Harel - the Great Wolf. It doesn't seem right that a place so... wrong... would be his."

"How could walking corpses be here?" Brehan glanced around the corner before continuing on. He was starting to feel uneasy about this whole thing. The part of him that wanted to turn back began to argue with the part of him that wanted to keep exploring, to see what lore of the People he could uncover.

"Hahren Paivel once said that in places where many people died, it can become satheneran- a land of waking dreams. The Veil becomes weak and spirits slip into our world. Then they possess corpses and walk around." Tamlen shudder.

"Maybe this is the 'demon' the humans saw," Brehan said. Ignorant shems could easily mistake the shambling dead for a full on demon.

"It's hard to imagine anything else could live here with these... creatures. Still, worse things may be ahead. This place reeks

of something... wrong. Can you feel it?" They exchanged a look. Tamlen unslung his bow, and Brehan did the same. "Let's press on... I want to know how our people were involved with this."

#

Brehan threw himself to the side as the monstrous bearlike creature charged at him. Tamlen shot an arrow into it's side, but it simply whirled back and went for the archer. Brehan rolled to his feet and fired off two arrows in rapid succession. The bear roared, then turned towards him. Immediately, Tamlen fired again, and the two men took turns distracting and firing until the thing collapsed. Brehan moved towards it, drew back his bowstring, and fired a last arrow directly into the thing's skull before allowing himself to breathe a sigh of relief.

Tamlen shot him a triumphant look, then his eyes widened as he caught sight of something behind Brehan. Brehan turned to look, and saw the strangely glowing mirror. He exchanged a look with Tamlen, and the two walked towards it slowly.

Wonder filled Tamlen's voice. "It's beautiful, isn't it? I wonder what the writing says."

"The keeper might be able to translate it," Brehan said. He couldn't wait to let her know what they had found. An artifact like this more than rivaled any he'd seen before.

"Maybe, but she's not here to help us. Odd that it isn't broken

like everything else, especially with that bear lumbering around in here. I wonder what this writing is for?" He bent to get a closer look. "Maybe this isn't -" He jumped back as if startled. "Hey, did you see that? I think something moved inside the mirror."

Brehan moved closer. "Inside the mirror? Let me see." He narrowed his eyes. There was something, on the edge of his vision, but it seemed to vanish every time he tried to focus.

"Look! Don't you see it? There is is again! Can you feel that? I think it knows we're here. I just need to take a closer look... It's... showing me places. I can see... some kind of city... underground? And..." Slowly, Tamlen's voice began to change from wonder to dread. "There's a great blackness... It... it saw me! Help! I can't look away!"

Panic filled Tamlen's voice, and Brehan grabbed at him. Something seemed to claw at the edges of his eyes, and then pain filled him. He thought he was falling, tumbling off the edge of some great chasm. Someone was screaming, and then, darkness.

#

"Are you sure we are still going the right way?" Lenore asked. "This doesn't look like much of a road."

"I have traveled this path before," Duncan assured her. He glanced at the others. Brosca kept stopping to look at leaves and then hurrying to catch back up with them. Saitada, for her

part, acted like a walk through the woods was just another daily activity for her. She caught his eye and winked, and he had to hide a smile. Lenore, however, was starting to lean heavily on her staff, and it took him a moment to realize that somewhere along the line, Jerath had taken her pack and was carrying it in addition to his own. The young elf hadn't said more than a half dozen words since they had left Denerim, but even carrying two backpacks he kept up easily. "We should reach a village in time for dinner."

"Good," Lenore said. "I could... do with a bath, I think." She held her robes up as she stepped over a fallen log. He blinked, and realized that she was also wearing Jerath's boots. He glanced back at the elf, who seemed to be having no problem with walking barefoot through the woods. Duncan sighed, and made a mental note to make some adjustments when they stopped for the night.

They hadn't gone more than a hundred paces more when something pinged lightly at the edge of his senses. He held up a hand, stopping their forward motion. Brosca and Lenore gave him curious looks, but both Saitada and Jareth laid hands on their blades as their eyes scanned the woods. Duncan drew his own blade, and moved in carefully.

Near the edge of a small cave lay an unconscious man in Dalish leather armor. Duncan moved closer. He could feel the darkness seeped into the skin of the young man. His eyes went to the mouth of the cave before going back to the elf. Standing, he would have been tall for a Dalish. His light brown hair held spiderwebs, and his hands were filthy, as though

he'd crawled out of the cave. Duncan put his age at around twenty.

"Dalish?" Saitada asked, as she came to stand next to him.

"His caravan is probably nearby," Duncan said. He looked up at her. "Follow the trail, and take the others ahead to the village. If we come to the caravan in force, we may make them nervous."

Saitada nodded. Jerath looked a bit reluctant, but followed her lead. For a moment, Duncan thought about inviting the elf to come with, but decided against it. He picked up the unconscious Dalish and started carrying him back in the direction it appeared the Dalish had come.

The Dalish opened his eyes for a moment. Duncan looked down. "Can you hear me? I am..." Duncan hesitated a moment. He could feel the taint in the young man's blood. The situation was already beyond any hope. "Very sorry." The Dalish stared a moment, his green tinged brown eyes focusing on Duncan's face for a heartbeat. Then he passed out again.

16. Chapter 16

Brehan woke. He threw the blanket off him and scrambled backwards before realizing he was laying in an aravel. He blinked, then looked around. The keeper's aravel, if he was not mistaken. A frown crossed his face, and then the events of the cave flooded into his awareness. He dressed hurriedly, and exited the wagon.

No sooner was he standing in daylight than Fenarel was standing in front of him. "You're awake! You've the gods' own luck, lethallin. You're back at camp. Everyone is worried about you." Fenarel gave him a concerned look. "How do you feel?"

Brehan looked around then did it again. "Worried. Where is Tamlen?"

"We don't know. The shem who brought you here saw no sign of him?"

"There was a human?" That bearded face hadn't been part of a dream then.

"A shem brought you back two days ago. You don't remember him?"

"I've been here for two days?!" Brehan stared at his friend.

"He was a Grey Warden and appeared out of nowhere with you slung over his shoulder. You were delirious with fever. He said that he found you outside a cave in the forest, unconscious and alone. He left you here and ran off again. The keeper's been using the old magic to heal you."

"Is anyone looking for Tamlen?" Brehan had seen no sign of his best friend in the wagon, nor had he caught even the slightest glimpse among the wagons.

"Of course!" Fenarel assured him. "Most of the hunters are off looking for him right now. But the keeper wanted to talk to you as soon as you awoke. Stay here - I'll get her."

Brehan leaned on the wagon as he watched Fenarel run off. He felt strange, like he could almost feel the blood running through his veins. The hairs on the back of his neck felt like they were standing, and he itched under the skin, almost in his bones. He hurt all over.

He saw Fenarel returning, followed by Keeper Marethari. Marethari immediately laid her hands on his shoulders, peering up into his eyes. "I see you are awake, da'len. It is fortunate Duncan found you when he did... I know not what dark power held you, but it nearly bled the life from you. It was difficult even for my magic to keep you alive."

Brehan considered telling her how he felt, and decided against it. The last thing he needed was her shoving him back into a sickbed. "Then Tamlen could be sick, as well?"

She gave a worried frown. "If he encountered the same thing you did, yes. The Grey Warden said he found you alone outside a cave, already stricken. Duncan thought there may have been darkspawn creatures inside the cave. Is that true?"

"There were walking corpses and other strange monsters." Brehan thought back to the bear creature. Surely it couldn't have been that. The thing hadn't managed to touch him or Tamlen.

"Walking corpses?" Marethari shook her head. "Dark magic, but not darkspawn. I know not what the other creatures might have been. What else did you find? What is the last thing you remember?"

"A mirror." The memory was fuzzy around the edges. He rubbed his forehead. "Tamlen touched it."

"A mirror?" Marethari folded her hands, then paced a few steps before looking back at him. "And it caused all this? I have never heard of such a thing in all the lore we have collected. Sigh. I was hoping for answers when you woke, but there are only more questions. And Tamlen remains missing. He is more important than any lore in these ruins. If he is as sick as you were, his condition is grave. Duncan returned to the cave to search for darkspawn, but we cannot rely on him to look for Tamlen as well. We must go ourselves, and quickly." She gave him another worried look. "Do you feel well enough to show us the way, da'len? Without you we will not find it."

"I am up to it, Keeper. I feel fine." The way she looked at him when she spoke, Brehan was sure she knew he was lying about that last part.

She gave him a reluctant nod. "I am relieved to hear it. I am ordering the clan to pack the camp so we can go north. Take Merrill with you to the cave. Find Tamlen if you can, but do it swiftly."

"Take Merrill to the cave and find Tamlen." Brehan tried to give her a reassuring smile. "I understand."

"Go quickly, for Tamlen's life hangs in the balance."

"Pray for us, keeper," Brehan said as he grabbed his bow and quiver.

#

Fenarel fell into step behind him as he walked towards where the first was standing. "I want to go with you. Keeper Marethari probably won't approve, but I can help find Tamlen."

Brehan nodded. "All right, come with us."

"Good. I'll follow you, just to make sure Merrill doesn't go running to the keeper when you tell her I'm coming."

They made their way through the camp, and Brehan saw Merrill staring into a fire. He walked towards her, and she turned and gave him a nod. "The Keeper told me I'm to accompany you back to those caves. As her apprentice, I

may see something you missed. But our main objective is to find Tamlen, of course." She bit her lip. "We must make haste; he may not have much time."

"Fenarel is coming with us. Any objections?" Brehan asked.

"That depends on the keeper," Merrill said dubiously. "I thought we're supposed to go alone."

Brehan glanced over his shoulder at Fenarel, and decided it was easier to ask forgiveness than permission. "I did ask. She's fine with it."

Merrill arched an eyebrow, and for a moment Brehan was sure she was going to call him on the lie. "She is? I suppose I needn't worry about it, then. Are you ready?"

"Let's head out now," Brehan said. His friend was out there. As bad as he was feeling at the moment, Tamlen must be far worse.

#

Fenarel saw the darkspawn first. Brehan drew his bow, firing at the same time as his companion. His shot missed the mark by inches. His second struck the creature, but it took a third for him to drop it. Fenarel shot him a worried look, and Brehan gave him a reassuring nod.

He led them up the game trail. The body of another darkspawn was laying just outside the cave entrance, it's

head nearly severed from its neck. He stepped inside the cave, and looked around.

"So these are the ruins?" Merrill asked. "Interesting." She looked around. "They're definitely of human origin. Yet elven artifacts are scattered amongst them. Nothing explains the monsters though. But we must find Tamlen - or what's left of him. I can't imagine he's still alive with those creatures about."

"Don't talk like that," Brehan said. He saw her flinch back from the anger in his voice. "You don't know."

She gave him a remorseful look. "You're right. We should explore further before I go on about my fears." She swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Brehan opened his mouth, then tore his eyes away from hers and headed further into the cave. More darkspawn moved towards them. This time, at least, his arrows flew true. There were enough that he had to drop his bow and move forward with his blade, holding back a short, squat darkspawn while Fenarel and Merrill aimed their attacks at the others.

He spared them only a brief glance before continuing on, stepping over the corpses of some darkspawn that had clearly been killed earlier. All wonder of the place was lost now. Without hesitation, he moved towards the chamber that had held the mirror.

#

Duncan's senses pinged. He could sense the taint approaching, yet the feeling wasn't quite like that of the darkspawn. He laid a hand on his blade and waited. The figures that came through the door were dressed in Dalish armor. "So you were the one fighting darkspawn. I thought I heard combat." He thought he recognized the leader of the small, and then focused his senses. The taint in the young man's blood seemed to pulse. "You're the elf I found wandering the forest, aren't you? I'm surprised you have recovered."

The young man gave him an angry look as he came deeper into the chamber. "I don't know you, human. Nor do I owe you anything."

An elven woman shook her head, and her voice was chiding. "Even if you didn't owe this human your life, a Grey Warden deserves respect."

"He owes me nothing," Duncan said as he watched them approach. He took his hand off the sword, but kept it ready. "It was my duty to return an injured Dalish to your clan; your people have always been allies with the Grey Wardens."

"An understanding human?" The elven man's voice was full of contempt. "How nice for you."

He felt a trace of irritation, and forced it down. "My name is Duncan, and it's a pleasure to finally meet you. The last time we spoke, you were barely conscious."

The woman, at least, gave him a friendly smile and a courteous bow. "Andaran atish'an, Duncan of the Grey Wardens. I am Merrill, the keeper's apprentice."

"And I am Fenarel," the second man said. "Did you..." He looked around, and a note of respect entered his voice. "Come here alone, human? Battling all those creatures?"

"Yes. Though I must admit, you took a great deal of the pressure off me." Duncan gave them a nod of gratitude then he frowned. "Your keeper did not send you after me, did she? I told her I would be in no danger."

"We're not in the habit of rescuing humans," the tainted elf shot back.

"It's a good thing I don't return that feeling, wouldn't you say?" Duncan returned the young man's glare with a level look.

The tainted elf looked away first. "We're looking for our brother Tamlen."

Duncan felt a pang of sympathy. "So you and your friend Tamlen both entered this cave? And you saw this mirror?"

The tainted elf turned back towards him hopefully. "You've found some trace of Tamlen?"

"No," Duncan said. It was best not to let the young man get his hopes up any further. "Nor do I think I will. The Grey Wardens have seen artifacts like this mirror before; it is

Tevinter in origin, used for communication. Over time some of them simply... break. They become filled with the same taint as the darkspawn. Tamlen's touch must have released it..." He saw realization dawn on the young man's face, and continued grimly. "It's what made you sick - and Tamlen too, I presume."

"We need to take it to the keeper," the tainted elf said as he headed for the stairs.

Duncan held up a hand to stop him. "The darkspawn are drawn to the mirror. Do you want to lead them to your clan?"

"I do not fear this sickness," the woman said. "The keeper knows how to cure it."

"She may have weakened it, but she cannot cure it. Your recovery is only temporary." Very temporary, if he was any judge. Without additional aid, the young man before him would be dead, or worse, by morning. "I can sense the sickness in you, and it is spreading. Look inside yourself and you will see."

The tainted elf looked away from him, and stared at the mirror. "Perhaps there is..." He swallowed. "something to what you say."

Duncan nodded. He was mildly surprised the young man was on his feet. The elf was strong. Perhaps there was a chance for him after all. "Confirm it with your keeper later, if you like. For now, we must deal with the mirror... It is a danger." He

stepped towards the mirror, and before the elves could protest, drew his blade and shattered the glass. The tainted elf's jaw dropped. "It is done. Now, let's leave this cursed place. I must speak to the keeper immediately regarding your cure."

"How dare you just destroy the mirror!"

For a moment, Duncan actually thought the tainted elf was going to draw his blade. He took a step forward, using his greater size to loom over the other man. "I would dare more than that to stop such a threat," he said, his voice hard and cold.

The tainted elf's voice was bleak, almost pleading. "What about Tamlen?"

"There is nothing we can do." Duncan reached out to lay a hand on the young man's shoulder.

The elf jerked away, then began looking around the room again. "I'm not leaving until I find him!"

Duncan watched him for a moment. "Let me be very clear: There is nothing you can do for him. He's been tainted for three days now, unaided. Through your keeper's healing arts and your own willpower, you did not die. But Tamlen has no chance. Trust me when I say that he is gone. Now, we should return."

"Won't there at least be a body?" For a moment, the tainted

elf looked as young as Jerath, if not younger.

"The darkspawn would have taken it," Duncan told him.

"Why would they take his body?" the second man said from the chamber entrance. Duncan had almost forgotten he was there. "Not to... eat it, I hope..."

"Darkspawn are evil creatures, and it's best to leave it at that. I'm... sorry." That, at least, was the truth.

"I'm not ready to give up the search just yet."

"If you prefer, I can wait just outside while you look around. But I assure you, he will not be here. I suggest, however, leaving sooner rather than later. You are sick, whether you feel it or not, and it does you no good to linger."

The look on the tainted elf's face was almost hateful. "Then wait outside. I'll be out when I'm ready."

Duncan sighed. "As you wish. I will see you back at camp." He left the three elves behind as he exited the cave. Though he searched his senses, the only remaining taint he could find was in the young man's blood. It was going to take them more than a month to reach Ostagar. Mentally, he kicked himself for leaving the joining supplies with Harl. The odds of the young man making it that long were slim.

Still, with the Keeper's magic... Lenore obviously was versed in healing, and Irving had said she knew something of alchemy

as well. Duncan sighed. If he did nothing, the young man would die, and possibly infect others. And if he came with them, at the very least, Duncan's senses would allow him to monitor the progress of the taint. At the worst, he could give the young man a peaceful end.

He heard a sound from inside the cave. Fenarel had his hand on the tainted elf's shoulder, and it was clear it had taken both the other elves to get the young man to give up the search.

17. Chapter 17

Brehan followed Fenarel and Merrill back to the camp silently. Merrill was talking to Duncan, but the words failed to register. He was only dimly aware of the stares of the others as they entered the camp. Marethari rushed towards them. "I'm relieve you have returned!" Her gaze flicked to the shem. "And I did not expect to see you again so soon, Duncan."

"I was not expecting to return so soon either, Keeper."
Duncan's voice was grave.

"Dare I ask of Tamlen? What did you find of him?" Her eyes went over each of them in turn.

Brehan shot Duncan an angry look. "The Grey Warden says we will find nothing."

"I see." Marethari leaned on her staff for a moment, her face lined with grief. She turned to her apprentice. "Merrill, what about the mirror? Did you bring anything back?"

Duncan spoke before Merrill could reply. "I can answer that, Keeper. I destroyed the mirror."

Marethari drew herself up and gave him one of her disapproving looks. Brehan felt a stab of irritation when the

shem failed to be cowed. "I intended to use it to find a cure for this mysterious illness. I trust you had good reasons for your actions?"

"There is much to discuss, Keeper. I have learned a great deal since I was last here."

"Let us speak privately within my aravel then, Duncan." She looked back at them. "Merrill, warn the hunters. If darkspawn are about, I want the clan prepared."

"Ma nuvenin, Keeper. Right away." Merrill scampered off. Brehan watched her go. For a moment, he considered telling Marethari about the piece of mirror Merrill had picked up, just to see the expression on the ignorant shem's face. He shook his head. There would be time for that later, after the warden was on his way out of their camp.

"Da'len," Marethari called his attention back to her. "Allow me some time to speak with Duncan. Seek us out at my aravel later, and we can discuss your cure."

"Very well, Keeper," Brehan said. He gave the warden another look, but the man's face was unreadable behind the tangle of fur on his face.

"Tell Hahren Paivel what has occurred. He now has the sad task of preparing a service for the dead. Follow me, Duncan. I am eager to hear what you have to say."

#

"He is tainted, isn't he?" Marethari said as soon as they entered her aravel.

"Yes," Duncan replied simply. There was no use dragging it out.

"I was afraid of that the moment you said you were a warden." She sat down. "His behavior..." She sighed. "Brehan and Tamlen have been friends their entire lives. It was rare indeed, to see one without the other." She wrapped her arms around herself. "To lose them both..."

"Brehan's situation is not hopeless," Duncan said. "I am on my way to rejoin my fellow wardens at Ostagar, and have several recruits already. If he survives until then, we may be able to help him."

"There are herbs, potions that can stave off the effects of blight," Marethari stood, and began to rummage through parchment.

"One of the other recruits came from the circle tower, and has some skill at healing. If you can provide instructions, she can treat him."

"I will write them out." She found a pen, and set to work. After a moment, she looked back up at him. "He will not want to join you."

"I can exercise the rite of conscription."

She shook her head. "Do that, and he will flee you the first opportunity he gets. Let me convince him." She went back to scribing.

Duncan watched her patiently. It seemed the trip to Ostagar was going to be more interesting than he thought.

#

Hahren Paivel's eyes met Brehan's, and the elder immediately began shooing the children away. "So you return with the Grey Warden, but without Tamlen. What happened, da'len? Is he truly lost to us?"

"It's my fault." Brehan kicked a rock into the fire. "I failed the clan." I failed Tamlen.

Paivel wrapped his arms around Brehan and held him for a moment. "You've done nothing of the sort, da'len. Do not blame yourself." He looked up at Brehan, and sighed before stepping back. "It seems the will of the Creators that I sing the dirge for those I held in my arms as babes. I think I know why our immortal ancestors would sleep."

He stood, gazing into the fire. Brehan watched him a moment, then joined his own voice to Paivel's recitation. "Swiftly do stars burn a path across the sky, hast'ning to place one last kiss upon your eye. Tenderly land enfolds you in slumber, softening the rolling thunder. Dagger now sheathed, bow no longer tense. During this, your last hour, only silence."

Brehan felt tears burning the back of his eyes. "Will you prepare a service for Tamlen, please?"

"Of course. We've no body to return to the soil, but we shall still sing for Tamlen. The Creators must come to guide him to the Beyond." He sighed. "Tell the keeper it shall be done before the clan is ready to move on."

"Thank you, Hahren," Brehan said. He turned and started to go, but the elder's voice stopped him.

"You know, it's imperative now more than ever to pass on what we know to the young." Paivel set a hand on Brehan's shoulder. "Let us tell these children of the fall of the Dales. You can honor me by sharing in the telling."

Brehan met the storyteller's eyes. He knew what the man was trying to do, and loved him all the more for it. He nodded, and Paivel smiled as he gestured for the children to approach once more. Paivel's voice rang out, strong and clear. "Children, hear of the fall of the Dales! Hear the tale of what makes you Dalish..."

Together, they wove the story. Brehan even managed to stir himself to make a few additions, and Paivel smiled even as he shook his head in disapproval.

"We are the Dalish: keepers of the lost lore, walkers of the lonely path," Paivel recited.

Brehan's own voice rang out, strong and firm. "We are the last

Elvhenan. Never again shall we submit."

Paivel watched the children return to their play before looking back to Brehan. "The Oath of the Dales and no smart-mouthed comment? Thank the Creators for small mercies." He opened his mouth, then closed it again and sighed. "I will let you get on with your business now."

Brehan nodded, and walked away. He shot a glance at Marethari's aravel, but neither the keeper or warden were visible. Fists clenched and unclenched as he fought the urge to scratch at the strange sensation beneath his skin. Once the warden was gone, Marethari could work her spells and everything would be fine. He saw Ashalle's worried glance, and walked towards her.

"Thank the Creators you're safe! I questioned the keeper's wisdom at sending you off while you're still sick, but my doubts were misplaced." She ran a worried hand over his cheek as she had so often when he was small. "Tamlen isn't with you. Is it as everyone fears?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Brehan said. He regretted the harsh words almost immediately, and set a hand on her arm. "We never found his body."

"Oh, poor dear." Ashalle's eyes welled up. "This is horrible news!" He drew her to him as she started to weep, and felt tears of his own fall into her hair. She clutched him to her tightly, as though afraid if she let go he would also vanish. "Please, take care of yourself and get better. We can't bear

to lose anyone else."

"It's my duty to protect the clan first." He smiled down at the woman he thought of as his mother.

Her smile was fierce and proud. "As you always say. But you can't help anyone if you're dead, can you?" She held him to her again, then her eyes went past him to where the warden and keeper were exiting the keeper's aravel. "I will see you soon, my dear. You make me very proud."

#

Duncan watched the young man stride towards them, and gave him an appraising look, mentally comparing him to his other elvish recruit. The Dalish was considerably taller and broader in the shoulder, but then, Brehan was at least five years older than Jerath, if not more. His facial tattoos were tinged green, and Duncan found himself wondering what the pattern represented. He spoke as soon as the young man reached them. "Your keeper and I have spoken, and we've come to an arrangement that concerns you. My order is in need of help. You are in need of a cure. When I leave, I hope you will join me. You would make an excellent warden."

To his disappointment, Brehan's rejection of the idea was immediate. "Me? A Grey Warden? This is madness!"

Marethari stepped to Duncan's shoulder. "This is not madness, da'len. Your survival depends upon it."

"The darkspawn taint courses through your veins." He saw from the young man's eyes that he'd only confirmed what Brehan had already suspected. "That you recovered at all is remarkable. But eventually, the taint will sicken and kill you, or worse. The Grey Wardens can prevent that, but it means joining us."

"I will not join out of pity." Brehan squared his shoulders and lifted his chin defiantly as he glared.

Duncan sighed. "This is not simply charity on my part. I would not offer this if I did not think you had the makings of a Grey Warden." He glanced at Marethari, and decided to lay everything out. Misleading this young man would only cause further difficulties down the road. "Let me be clear: You will likely never return here. We go to fight the darkspawn, a battle that will take us far from your clan. But we need you, and others like you."

"I would rather take my chances." Brehan shook his head, and gave Duncan a contemptuous look. "No, I refuse to go."

Marethari's voice became firm, and Duncan watched as the young man began to wither under her words. "A great army of darkspawn gathers in the south. A new Blight threatens the land. We cannot outrun this storm. Long ago, the Dalish agreed to aid the Grey Wardens against a Blight, should that day arrive. We must honor that agreement. It breaks my heart to send you away. As it would to watch you slowly die from this sickness. This is your duty, and your salvation."

Brehan looked over his shoulder at where an older woman stood on the hill. His shoulders slumped. "If this is my duty, then I will go."

"I welcome you to the order." Duncan tried to keep his voice kind. "It is rare to have a Dalish among us, but they have always served with distinction."

Marethari stepped past him, and took Brehan's hands in hers. "I know you'll do your clan proud, da'len. Take this ring. It is your heritage and will protect you against the darkness to come.

"A valuable gift," Duncan said. "So... are you ready to go?" The sooner they were underway, the better. By now, Saitada would be starting to worry.

"I would like to stay for Tamlen's funeral." Brehan did not meet his eyes.

"We have much ground to cover," Duncan sighed, then relented. "But I cannot deny you that. Say your farewells... then we must be off."

"Come then, da'len. Before the Creators guide you from us, let your clan embrace you one last time," Marethari took the young man's arm, and drew him away.

Duncan remained near the wagon, watching the clan and trying to remain unobtrusive. Smoke from the fire carried the words of the elven song through the trees. Brehan's voice was

rich, and clear despite the grief that was visible on his face.

One of the elves that had met him in the cave, Fenarel, approached Duncan while Brehan was making his farewells. He held out a small, carved token. "For luck," he said, looking up at Duncan. "Andruil, the huntress. It seemed appropriate for a warden."

Duncan accepted the token. "I thank you."

"Safe journeys, Hahren," Fenarel said before walking away.

Brehan joined Duncan a moment later. He gave only the barest nod. Duncan returned it, then started away from the camp.

#

Brehan twitched his shoulder uncomfortably as they entered the small village. Duncan led him towards a two story building. A man exited just as they approached. Brehan recognized one of the hunters he and Tamlen had terrorized earlier. He started to give the warden a cheerful greeting, and then he caught sight of Brehan standing there. Brehan narrowed his eyes. The shem gulped, stumbled backwards off the porch, and then scrambled back to his feet and ran.

Duncan looked back at Brehan, and Brehan smirked before giving the warden a nonchalant shrug. Duncan merely shook his head and entered the inn.

A dwarven woman with the reddest hair he had ever seen immediately waved. "There you are. We were starting to wonder if we should go look for you." She nodded to Brehan. "You're looking a bit healthier than the last time we saw you."

"Andaran atish'an, durgen'len," Brehan said.

"Atrast vala," Saitada replied, completely unfazed by his use of elvish.

Brehan saw Duncan's lips twitch slightly. "This is Brehan. He will be joining us."

"That's one way to blow the dust off the silver vein," Saitada said. "I'm Saitada." She turned towards the others and pointed them out in turn. "This is Brosca, Lenore, and Jerath."

Brehan glanced at each in turn. Another dwarf, a shem tower-slave, and a flat ear child. Wonderful. Duncan gestured for him to sit, and he did so reluctantly. The shem woman leaned towards him, her face eager. "I've read about the Dalish. Do you really travel in land ships?"

"Aravels," he said.

"What?"

"They are called aravels," he said, his voice curt.

Before the mage could respond, Duncan spoke. "Lenore, may I have a word?"

She nodded, and followed Duncan to another table. Brehan saw Duncan take out the scroll case Marethari had given him, and began talking to the mage quietly. Saitada glanced at them before turning back to Brehan. "Bow or sword?" she asked.

"What?"

"Your preferred weapon. Bow or sword?"

"I can handle both," he said, curling his upper lip. He glanced at the flat ear, and noticed the child was wearing a sword. He smirked.

#

Lenore looked over the notes that Marethari had provided. She furrowed her brow at the formula before nodding at Duncan. "I can handle this. We may need to pick up some more ingredients."

"Marethari gave me enough for a couple weeks," Duncan said. "And claims that Brehan will be able to find many of the herbs needed." He glanced over at the Dalish elf, who appeared to be putting no effort into making friends with his new companions.

"This is fascinating," Lenore said as she went through the scroll. "I wish I'd been able to talk to her. Maybe if we get another chance later."

He left her to going over the scrolls, and went back to the other table. Brosca was glowering at Brehan, and Saitada was starting to look frustrated. "Perhaps it is time we all got some sleep," he said in an attempt to forestall hostilities.

"Good idea," Saitada said. "The only problem is they only had two rooms available, each with only two cots."

"Room in the barn," Jerath said quietly.

"Barn works," Brehan shrugged. Better horses than shems.

Duncan frowned then nodded. "We will need to get an early start. We still need to pick up the rest of the supplies from Highever before we head on to Ostagar."

Lenore gathered the parchments, and Brosca followed her up the stairs. The two elves headed for the outside door. Saitada watched them go before raising an eyebrow. "That boy is full of sod."

"I assume you mean Brehan."

"I'm going to trust you had your reasons for recruiting him."

"There was little choice in the matter. He has the blight." Duncan frowned. "He and a friend encountered it in that cave. We were not able to recover his friend."

"Well. Shit." Saitada sighed. "Explains why he's cranky." She nodded. "I'll tell Brosca to cut him some slack." She leaned back in her chair. "Lenore and Brosca are getting along well.

Brosca even managed to get Jerath to string together a couple sentences." She smiled, then gestured for the innkeeper to bring over a couple drinks. "You don't look eager to follow your own 'get some sleep' advice."

Duncan laughed, and accepted the drink the innkeeper handed him. "What is that saying of yours? Time is rusting? We know the darkspawn are massing, and we know where..."

"But we don't know when. There were spawn in the woods?"

"They were drawn to an artifact in the cave. I believe they were stragglers, rather than part of a larger horde. This area should be safe a while longer."

Saitada shook her head. "Woods on three sides, and no palisade. Unless we defeat an archdemon at Ostagar, safety is about to become an illusion."

#

Brehan woke the next morning. He started to go over to wake the flat ear, then realized that the kid was already up and packed. He felt a stab of irritation. "Morning Garret," he said.

"Jerath."

"What?"

"My name is Jerath."

"Whatever," Brehan replied. He bundled his bedroll together

quickly, and tied it on to his pack before sliding down the loft ladder. He heard a gasp behind him, and turned to see another of the hunters from earlier. The one who had wet himself. Brehan gave him a slow smile, showing a hint of teeth, and the man immediately turned and fled. Brehan laughed, then glanced up at the flat ear.

He frowned. Jerath was already busying himself with bridling a donkey. Brehan approached, and looked the beast over. Compared to a halla, the thing was ungainly. He sniffed. And smelly. He glanced back at where the shem had fled. "I thought he was going to wet himself again."

Jerath didn't respond. Brehan looked at the sword the kid had hanging over his hip. It was styled similarly to the one the shem warden had carried. "You any good with that?" Brehan asked, indicating the sword. He got a shoulder twitch in response. "How does a flat ear join the wardens?"

"The same way anyone else does, I expect," Jerath said. He started putting the pack saddle on the donkey.

#

Duncan came downstairs to find Brosca already finishing breakfast. The dwarf took a drink from his tankard, then smiled. "Just missed Jerath. He said he'd get the donkey packed up."

Duncan nodded then held up three fingers to the innkeeper. He could hear Saitada and Lenore making their way to the

common room. Brosca kicked a chair out for him as he approached the table. The two women arrived just as the innkeeper set plates down. Lenore nodded to Duncan. "I mixed a batch this morning."

"Thank you." Duncan glanced at Brosca. "Has he been in yet?"

"Jerath said he was still asleep. I told him not to wake the duster until the last possible second."

"Give him a bit of time," Saitada said. "Perhaps he'll be more pleasant company after a good night's sleep."

#

They entered the barn just in time to see Brehan punch Jerath. The smaller elf stumbled backwards as Brehan came at him, still swinging. Duncan and Saitada immediately ran forward. Duncan grabbed Brehan's wrist as Saitada interposed herself between the combatants. Brehan was cursing in elvish. "That's enough," Duncan said. He tightened his grip as Brehan tried to pull free, then used his greater size to pin Brehan against a stable door. "I said that's enough."

He glanced over his shoulder. Jerath was sitting on the ground, blood streaming from his nose. Saitada pulled a cloth from her pocket, and offered it to the kid. Lenore went to Jerath, and her fingers started to glow slightly as she worked a quick healing spell. "What the hell is going on here?" Duncan demanded.

"None of your business, shem," Brehan practically spat.

"I beg to differ," Duncan told him.

"My lord?" a small voice said. Duncan turned towards the sound. A woman, old enough for just a tint of gray to show in her hair, stepped out from one of the stalls. "Perhaps I could clarify?"

Duncan nodded at her. He looked at Brehan, then released him. Brehan glared, but made no further attempts to continue combat. "Speak," Duncan said.

"I picked this up," she held something out. Brosca took it from her, then walked over to Duncan. "I was looking at it when that man caught sight of me. I think he believed I had stolen it from him. The boy attempted to intervene."

Duncan looked down at what Brosca was holding. The trinket was obviously elvish. Duncan held out a hand for it, but Brehan snatched it before Brosca could hand it to him. It disappeared into Brehan's belt pouch, and the Dalish glared at him.

"It must have dropped while you were packing," Duncan told him.

"I didn't drop it. She must have taken it when we weren't looking."

"I see. So naturally, when you couldn't take your ire out on an

unarmed woman, you decided to punch a boy half your size." Duncan folded his arms.

Brehan had the good graces to look ashamed of himself. Duncan looked over at Brosca. "Finish packing. The sooner we are on the road the better." He looked at the woman. "Are you alright?"

She stepped further out, then gave Jerath a worried look as he stood up. She frowned. "Maker, you've got blood all over you." She glanced at Duncan. "I'm fine. His shirt is ruined." She wrung her hands a moment. "I'll be right back," she said before running out of the barn.

Jerath wiped the rest of the blood from his face. "I had just finished," he said, glancing at where Brosca was leading the donkey out of the stall.

"Then let's get moving."

"I haven't had breakfast," Brehan said.

"Well, that sounds too bad for you," Brosca said, glaring at him.

Brehan started to protest, and Duncan shot him a look. The elf went silent. Duncan was leading them out of the barn when the woman returned, carrying a parcel. She thrust it at Jerath. "These are too small for my son, but they should fit you, warden," she said.

Jerath's expression was startled as he accepted the parcel.
"Thank you, ma'am."

"Maker go with you, wardens," she said, stepping back so they could pass. Duncan gave her a nod of farewell, and began the journey towards Highever.

18. Chapter 18

"Gentle release. Don't pluck. It's a bowstring, not a harp."

"You don't actually pluck a harp string either." Oriana pointed out.

"Gentle release. Don't pluck. It's not a chicken." Cathiel amended, resulting in an amused laugh from Oriana.

Oren let go of the string. The arrow flew wobbly, and hit the center of the target just deep enough to stick. "I hit it! I hit it!"

"Well shot, my lord." Ser Gilmore said. The guards gave the boy a bit of applause as he held up his bow triumphantly.

Oren grabbed for another quiver of arrows and continued practice. Cathiel moved away, letting the boy get comfortable shooting on his own, and joined Oriana in the shade. "He's getting big."

"He'll be as tall as Fergus soon."

"He's a better archer than Fergus already." Cathiel said with a wry grin.

Oriana handed Cathiel a bit of cloth. "Well, you've given my son a lesson in archery, the least I could do is give you a

lesson in needlepoint."

"I thought Antivans used poison for assassination, not boredom."

Oriana laughed. "It wouldn't hurt you to indulge in some lady-like activities."

"That's what you said about me learning to play the harp, and now look. We've got a Blight." Cathiel gave Oriana a teasing smile. "Who knows what will happen if I learn needlepoint?"

Oriana pretended to ponder a moment, then reached over and firmly took the cloth away from Cathiel. "You make an excellent argument."

Cathiel looked back over at Oren. "His aim is getting steadier. See how the arrows are all starting to cluster together. Perhaps when Fergus gets back, we can start taking Oren hunting."

"He would enjoy that, I'm certain." Oriana glanced over at the watching guards. "I was surprised to see young Ser Gilmore sneaking out of your quarters this morning." Oriana shook her head. "Shameful of you to get your mother's hopes up like that."

"Mother noticed?" Cathiel buried her face in her hands at Oriana's nod. "She's designing my wedding dress again, isn't she?"

"She may have mentioned the latest fashions from Antiva."

"Well, at least it's not the fashions from Orlais." She sighed. "When Fergus gets back, I'm going to need more nieces and nephews to distract mother." She caught Oriana's slight blush and her eyes widened. "Ooooooh... does mother know yet?"

Oriana shook her head. "I haven't told anyone yet. I'm only just beginning to be sure. I don't want to call down bad luck... if something were to happen to Fergus..."

"Fergus will be fine, sister." Cathiel put a reassuring hand on Oriana's shoulder. "Arl Howe's men will be here by morning, and then Father will be on his way to help keep an eye on things."

Oriana nodded. "I worry."

"As do I." She sighed. "You needn't worry about Rory. He'll be off to the Grey Wardens. I'm just... giving him a proper send off, if you know what I mean."

Oriana laughed. "I do indeed. But it's going to be far better to welcome them home." They put their heads together and giggled for a moment.

Cathiel watched as Oren finished emptying the quiver. "Four bulls-eyes out of twelve arrows. Not bad. Maybe tomorrow I'll teach him how to pick locks."

"If you teach my son to pick locks I'm going to teach you how

to do an Orlesian waltz."

"You fight dirty, sister."

#

Duncan glanced back over his shoulder at the others. Highever was visible just over the next rise. He considered for a moment. Highever would likely be filled with soldiers, and the castle servants were likely already under strain. He glanced back again, his eyes lingering on Brehan. Saitada caught his gaze. "Duncan, perhaps we should simply make camp and let you go on ahead. I'd rather not get tripped over by a bunch of raw recruits."

He met her eyes and smiled. "Good idea. The clearing is just over there. We will need to get back underway by dawn."

Brehan folded his arms and lifted his chin. "So why are we stopping here then?"

"Ser Gilmore was assisting in getting the soldiers ready to march. I told him we'd pick him up on the way back."

"One last recruit, eh?" Brosca said. Duncan nodded, and Brosca clicked his tongue at the donkey, leading it off the path in the direction Duncan had indicated.

"Ser Gilmore and I will meet you here at first light." He gave her a small bow, then continued walking as she marshaled the others towards the clearing. He breathed a small sigh of

relief. The last thing he needed was Brehan antagonizing a Teryn. Hopefully, the young man would settle down soon.

#

Cathiel smiled, and slowed her walk a bit as she saw Ser Gilmore waiting for her. "You'll be off with the Grey Wardens in the morning then, won't you?"

"Are you going to miss me?" he asked, giving her a teasing smile.

She laid a hand over her heart. "You'll be off playing the hero, and I'll be here, playing the princess."

"I promise, you get yourself locked in a tower and I'll be there first thing to rescue you." He caught her hand, and kissed the back of it gallantly.

She cocked her head to one side. "You know, the last time rescuing was involved..."

He ran a hand through his hair. "Need I point out who got me in that bit of trouble in the first place?"

"I am going to miss you," she admitted.

"It's not like I'll never be back to visit." He started to raise a hand to brush her hair back from her face, then stopped when a servant passed by.

Cathiel lowered her voice and leaned towards him

conspiratorially. "I heard stories of Grey Warden..." She met his eyes, and then lowered hers pointedly. "Endurance..."

He blushed then moved in to kiss her. "I'll definitely be back to visit."

"I've got some time now..."

He sighed regretfully. "Except I fear your hound has the kitchens in an uproar once again. Nan is threatening to leave."

She laid a hand on his chest. "Nan is just blowing off steam. She's always been like that."

"Your mother disagrees. She insists you collect the dog, and quickly." He kissed her nose. "You know these mabari hounds. He'll listen to his mistress, but anyone else risks having an arm bitten off."

She leaned her head against him for a moment, then sighed. "Then I guess I should go collect him."

"That would be wise. Before Nan tears down the walls." He held her a moment. "You're quite lucky to have your own mabari war hound, you know. Smart enough not to talk, my father used to say. Of course, that means he's easily bored. Nan swears he confounds her just to amuse himself." His voice became more businesslike. "At any rate, your mother would have me accompany you until the matter is settled. Shall we?"

"To the kitchen then," Cathiel held her hand up as though leading a charge.

Ser Gilmore laughed, and rolled his eyes. "Just follow the yelling. When Nan's unhappy, she makes sure everyone knows it."

#

Lenore began mixing a potion. Brosca came over to watch. "Don't suppose you could add something to it? Maybe some gut rot?"

"I don't have the ingredients," she said. She considered a moment. "And that would be wrong."

"What's that one there?"

"Blood lotus. I'll need to gather more soon."

"And that one?"

"Elfroot. It's used for a lot of healing potions. Actually, in a pinch you can just make a tea or poultice out of it and get some benefit."

"Good to know," Brosca said. He gave her a conspiratorial look. "Does it at least taste like crap?"

"It should," she said. She held it towards him. "Smell it."

Brosca sniffed, and stepped back. "Well, that's satisfying, at

least."

"You know I can hear you," Brehan said.

Brosca smirked at him. "Really? I thought the ears were just for show."

"Enough," Saitada said before Brehan could respond. "Any more out of either of you, and you'll be doing footwork drills until you drop."

Brehan sneered, but subsided.

#

"Giant rats? It's like the start of every bad adventure tale my grandfather used to tell."

"Well, see, there you go," Cathiel told him. "And when the bards are singing your story, I'll be able to say, 'ha, I was there for his first adventure'."

Ser Gilmore shook his head at her fondly. "Your hound must have chased them in through their holes. Looks like he wasn't raiding the larder after all."

Griffon barked excitedly.

"It certainly looks that way," Cathiel said. She rubbed Griffon behind the ears. "Did you chase in the rats just so Rory could get a proper start to his legend?"

"Those were rats from the Korcari Wilds. Best not to tell Nan. She's upset enough as it is." He sighed. "But seeing as you've got your mabari well in hand, I'll be on my way. I'm to prepare for the arrival of more of the arl's men."

Cathiel caught his arm, and pulled him to her for another kiss. "I know, you'll be up all night. But find me at breakfast, and I'll make sure you get a proper send off."

He returned the kiss, and then smiled at her before leaving.

#

Eleanor Cousland was talking to her friend as Cathiel walked up the stairs. "And my dear Bryce brought this back from Orlais last year. The marquis who gave it to him was drunk, I understand, and mistook Bryce for the king." Cathiel shook her head. If she wasn't mistaken, her mother was also a little drunk. Eleanor smiled when she caught sight of Cathiel. "And here is my lovely daughter. I take it by the presence of that troublesome hound of yours that the situation in the kitchen is handled?"

Cathiel nodded. "Nan's head exploded, and my hound at the kitchen staff."

"Well, at least one of us will have had a decent dinner," Eleanor replied. Griffon barked at her. "Perhaps your hound left something I can feed my guests. Darling, you remember Lady Landra? Bann Loren's wife?"

Lady Landra gave Cathiel a friendly smile. "I think we last met at your mother's spring salon."

"Of course," Cathiel said, giving her a smile in return. "It is good to see you again, my lady."

Landra's smile became mischievous. "You're too kind, dear girl. Didn't I spend half the salon trying to convince you to marry my son?"

Behind her Dairren rolled his eyes. "And made a very poor case for it, I might add."

"You remember my son, Dairren?" Landra elbowed her lightly. "He's not married yet, either."

Dairren sighed. "Don't listen to her. It's good to see you again, my lady. You're looking as beautiful as ever."

"You're looking handsome, yourself." She smiled. He blushed almost as sweetly as Rory.

"And this is my lady-in-waiting, Iona." Landra gestured to an elven woman. "Do say something, dear."

Iona smiled demurely. "It is a great pleasure, my lady. You are as pretty as your mother describes."

"You would think that would make it easier to make a match for her, not more difficult," Eleanor said teasingly.

"Perhaps your daughter simply has a mind of her own, your

Ladyship. You should be proud," Dairren said. Cathiel found herself giving him another look.

Eleanor shook her head. "Proud doesn't get me any more grandchildren."

Cathiel started to laugh. "Perhaps we can speak alone sometime, Dairren?"

Dairren gave the two older women a look, then smiled affectionately as they giggled. "I would like that, my lady."

Landra started to say something, but stumbled slightly. "I think perhaps I shall rest now, my dear. Dairren, I will see you and Iona at supper."

Dairren nodded, and then flicked his eyes at Cathiel. "Perhaps we'll retire to the study for now."

"Good evening, your ladyship," Landra said. She walked off, arm in arm with Eleanor.

#

After settling Griffon down, Cathiel returned to the study. She spoke a few moments with Aldous, letting him draw her into a discussion of family history. She managed to elicit one proud smile from him before he wandered off muttering to himself about young people.

She entered the small study off the main library. Dairren was looking through a pile of books. He smiled up at her. "Hello,

again. Your castle's study is wonderful. Might I ask whose collection this is?"

"It was my grandfather's, but I come here often to read." She left out that she occasionally came here to do other things.

"So would I," Dairren said, gazing about enthusiastically. "Do you have a favorite book?"

Cathiel smiled coyly. "The Art of Passionate Love, by Brother Capria."

"Oh..." He turned a little bit red. "That was banned by the Chantry, wasn't it?" Quite..." He glanced down at the books uncertainly. "Provocative, I understand. I've, ah, never read it, myself."

"I could show you what I learned."

"Oh. That sounds... interesting." A slow smile spread across his face. "Um... here?"

"You're going to be riding with my father tomorrow?" She waited for him to nod, then smiled. "Why don't you come to my room later tonight?"

"I..." He laid his hand on hers. "Suppose I could see you after everyone is asleep, for something of a more..." He blushed a little. "Intimate nature. If that's what you mean?" he asked, a little uncertainly.

"Is that what you want?" she said, trailing a hand down his

arm.

"I think I do," he said.

"Then I will see you tonight," she said. She moved away.

"I look forward to it," he said. "I shall see you then."

She smiled to herself as she left the room.

#

Duncan found Ser Gilmore overseeing soldiers. "Duncan," Ser Gilmore nodded. "I thought I heard someone say you had arrived."

"Are you ready?" Duncan asked him.

"It is going to be a long night, but yes, I should be ready to leave in the morning." He furrowed his brow, and then nodded. "Ah, the supplies you wanted. Arl Howe's men were delayed longer than anticipated, so Cathiel planned to simply send the wagon with them. Teryn Cousland is still here, if you wished to speak with him."

"I will do that. Thank you," Duncan said, and left the young man to his work.

19. Chapter 19

Cathiel awoke to Griffon barking and growling. Dairren slid out of the bed, and tried to calm the hound. Griffon ducked away from him, and went back to growling. Dairren looked up as she climbed out of the bed.

"I'm sorry, I've been trying to quiet him, but he won't have it. I don't know why he's so angry."

Cathiel grabbed a robe and drew it around her. "Perhaps something is wrong."

"I thought I heard yelling when I woke up." He frowned, then cocked his head. "But now I hear nothing."

Griffon growled.

Dairren grabbed his pants and slid them on quickly. "Wait here. I'm going to see if there's something out in the hall."

He had barely opened the door when an arrow caught him in the throat. He stumbled backwards and turned towards her before slumping to the ground. Cathiel dove towards her sword just as the men entered the room. Griffon sank his teeth into the leg of the man that had killed Dairren, and Cathiel closed, slashing open his throat. The second man

fumbled for his sword, and Cathiel shifted into the form Ser Gilmore had shown her just a few days ago. Her sword pierced the man's chest. It pulled from her hands as he fell. She swallowed, then ducked back and knelt next to Dairren.

He managed to tighten his hand around hers before he went limp. She closed his eyes, then let out a snarl and grabbed for her clothes.

#

No sooner had she buckled the leather breastplate around herself than she saw Griffon go on alert again. She slung her quiver over her shoulder, and grabbed her bow. A small cluck of her tongue signaled Griffon, and the hound surged forward, leaping on one of the men at the door to her parent's room. Cathiel drew and fired as Griffon slashed and tore. She felt a cold satisfaction when Griffon closed his teeth around the throat of the last man and jerked. There was a cruel snapping noise. "Good dog," she said.

The door opened, and Eleanor Cousland emerged. Her mother had managed to strap on armor of her own. "Darling! I heard fighting outside and I feared the worst! Are you hurt?"

"Those men killed Dairren." Cathiel's voice hitched slightly.

"What? Not Landra's son! But why? A scream woke me up. There were men in the hall, so I barred the door. Did you see their shields? Those are Howe's men! Why would they attack us?"

Cathiel felt a chill. "He's betrayed Father! He attacks while our troops are gone!"

"You don't think Howe's men were delayed... on purpose? That bastard! I'll cut his lying throat myself! Have you seen your father? He never came to bed!"

"No, I haven't. I was in my room."

"We must find him." Eleanor began to move forward.

Cathiel's eyes went to the other door. It was closed, and she heard no sound from inside. Her heart tightened. "We should check on Oriana and Oren, as well."

Eleanor's head jerked up. "Andraste's mercy! What if the soldiers went into your brother's room first? Let's check on them! Quickly! Then we'll look for Bryce downstairs!"

#

Cathiel slumped against the door frame as Eleanor ran to the side of the small corpse. "No! My little Oren! What manner of fiend slaughters innocents?!"

Her eyes flicked to Oriana. Her sister clutched a small knife in her hand, the same one Cathiel had given her for her birthday. A pretty little blade, meant to be strapped to an arm or thigh. It had been a joke, then. Just in case you want to stab someone over dinner. The corpse of one of Howe's men lay a few feet away. "I'll make them pay!"

"Howe is not even taking hostages!" Eleanor's voice was hot with tears. "He means to kill all of us! Oh, poor Fergus..." She stood, forcing herself to turn away. "Let's go. I don't want to see this!"

#

They paused at the top of the stairs. Eleanor looked out over the castle. "Can you hear the fighting? Howe's men must be everywhere."

Cathiel reached for another arrow. "Then we should take the fight to them!"

"Don't be foolish!" Eleanor caught her arm. "You would throw your life away! The front gates. That's where your father must be."

Cathiel pulled away. "We can't just let Howe win!"

"Listen, darling, we haven't much time." Eleanor stood in front of her, putting both hands on her shoulders. "If we can't find your father, you must get out of here alive. Without you and Fergus, the entire Cousland line dies here. If Howe's men are inside, they must already control the castle. We must use the servants' entry in the larder to escape. Do you hear me?"

"I want Howe dead!" She couldn't get the sight of Oren's little body out of her mind.

"Then survive and visit vengeance upon him!" Eleanor looked

into her daughter's eyes.

Cathiel closed her eyes, then opened them again. She nodded.

#

Ser Gilmore had blood on his face. Cathiel fumbled for a kerchief before realizing she was being foolish. "Your Ladyship! My lady! You're both alive!" He rushed towards them. "I was certain Howe's men had gotten through!"

"They did get through!" She lifted her eyes to his, and saw her own horror and grief reflected.

"They killed Oriana, and Oren... I can't believe..." Eleanor caught herself, then looked at Ser Gilmore. "Are you injured?"

"Don't worry about me, your Ladyship. Thank the Maker you two are unharmed. When I realized what was happening, it was all I could do to shut the gates. But they won't keep Howe's men out long! If you've another way out of the castle, use it quickly!"

"We need to find Father!"

He nodded. "When I last saw the teyrn, he'd been badly wounded. I urged him not to go, but he was determined to find you. He went towards the kitchen. I believe he thought to find you at the servants' exit in the larder."

"Bless you, Ser Gilmore." She looked at the soldiers. She

wanted to say something, anything. The words tasted trite.
"Maker watch over you!"

His eyes met hers again, and she knew he knew. "Maker watch over us all."

#

They had to kill a half dozen men to reach the larder. Nan's body lay in the kitchen door. Cathiel felt sick at the sight. Inside the larder, her father lay in a pool of his own blood. He smiled when he saw them. "There... you both are. I was..." He struggled to breath. "Wondering when you would get here."

"Bryce!" Eleanor threw herself down at his side. "Maker's blood, what's happening? You're bleeding!"

"Howe's men... found me first. Almost... did me in right there."

"We need to get you out of here!" She began searching the larder. Bandages. A litter. Anything she could use.

"I... I won't survive the standing, I think."

She shut her eyes, and refused to hear the words he said.
"Then we will stay and defend you."

"Once Howe's men break through the gate, they will find us! We must go!" Eleanor said, looking up at Cathiel.

"Someone... much reach Fergus... tell him what has happened."

"And take vengeance." Cathiel almost didn't recognize her own voice.

"Yes... vengeance." Her father's voice was weaker.

"Bryce, no! The servant's passage is right here! We can flee together, find you healing magic!"

"The castle is surrounded... I cannot make it."

Cathiel went for her bow as another figure entered the room. She halted when she recognized the warden. "I'm afraid the teryn is correct," Duncan said. "Howe's men have not yet discovered this exit, but they surround the castle. Getting past will be difficult."

"You are... Duncan, then? The Grey Warden?" Eleanor asked.

"Yes, your Ladyship. The teryn and I tried to reach you sooner."

"My daughter helped me get here, Maker be praised."

"I am not surprised." Duncan gave her a respectful nod.

Cathiel returned the nod with a grateful smile. "Thank you for saving my father."

Her face fell when he shook his head. "I fear your thanks are premature. I doubt I have saved him."

"Whatever is to be done now, it must be quick! They are coming!" Eleanor turned to look at the door.

Cathiel saw her father's face go firm. "Duncan... I beg you... take my wife and daughter to safety!"

"I will, your Lordship. But..." There was something in Duncan's eyes. She found herself shaking her head. "I fear I must ask for something in return."

"Anything!" Teryn Cousland said.

"What is happening here pales in comparison to the evil now loose in this world. I came to your castle seeking a recruit. The darkspawn threat demands that I leave with one."

"I... I understand." Her father's eyes went to her.

Cathiel shook her head again. "What about Ser Gilmore?" she asked desperately.

Duncan looked at her. "Truthfully, you were always my first choice. I will take the teryna and your daughter to Ostager, to tell Fergus and the king what happened." His eyes went back to the Teryn. "Then, your daughter joins the Grey Wardens."

"So long as justice comes to Howe..." It was the Teryn speaking now, not the father. "I agree."

Duncan held a hand out to her. "Then I offer you a place with the Grey Wardens. Fight with us."

Cathiel shoved his hand away. "My duty is to take vengeance on Arl Howe!"

"We will inform the king, and he will punish Howe. I am sorry, but a Grey Warden's duties take precedence over vengeance."

"Howe thinks he'll use the chaos to... advance himself. Make him wrong, pup. See that justice is done! Our family... always does our duty first. The darkspawn must be defeated. You must go. For your own sake, and for Ferelden's."

Cathiel knelt next to him. "I won't leave you!"

Her father's eyes went to Duncan. The Warden nodded, and put his hand on her shoulder. "Then I have no choice. I hereby invoke the Right of Conscription and recruit you into the Grey Wardens despite your objection."

"I'm sorry, pup, but... it's better this way." He took her hand, and squeezed it gently.

"We must leave quickly, then."

"Bryce, are you... sure?" Eleanor's eyes shifted from the warden to her husband, then back again.

He gave her a smile. "Our daughter will not die of Howe's treachery. She will live, and make her mark on the world."

Eleanor nodded, and returned the smile. "Darling, go with Duncan. You have a better chance to escape without me."

"Eleanor..."

"Hush Bryce. I'll kill every bastard that comes through that door to buy them time. But I won't abandon you."

"We can find another way," Cathiel pleaded. "We can fight."

"So we all die? No. Your place is with the Grey Wardens. Mine is with your father. At his side, to death and beyond."

"I love you both, so much." Tears streamed down her face.

"Then live, darling. Become a Grey Warden, and do what is right." Eleanor knelt next to her husband.

"I'm... so sorry it's come to this, my love..." Teryn Cousland took her hand.

"We had a good life and did all we could. It's up to our children, now."

"Then... go, pup. Warn your brother. And know that we love you both. You do us proud."

"They've broken through the gates. We must go now." Duncan had to grab her arm and pull her away.

"Goodbye, darling," she heard her mother's voice say as she jerked her arm free of Duncan and began to run on her own.

#

Duncan grabbed Cathiel's arm. He had to pull her the first couple steps, but then she hefted her bow and stepped forward, leading the way through the passage. She held up a closed fist and stopped just before the door. He gave her a nod, and drew his swords. She nocked an arrow and moved to the side of the door. At her nod, he opened it. Her arrow took the soldier on the other side through the eye, then Duncan stepped out and swept his sword through another. He took out a third and fourth, as Cathiel's arrows took out the fifth and sixth.

Cathiel sent a look back down the passage, but said nothing. Duncan began moving towards the camp where he had left the others, trying to stay low. They had almost made it to the edge of the forested area when he heard shouts behind him. He tossed a glance over his shoulder and saw a couple dozen Howe soldiers giving chase. He gestured for Cathiel to follow him into the woods and set a fast pace.

#

Brehan leaned against a tree, watching the other recruits. The dwarf woman and the mageling had their heads over a book, trying to teach the dwarf man how to read. The other elf kept to himself, and spoke rarely. Brehan gave him an appraising look. He moved like a mouse, self-effacing, trying not to draw attention to himself. Brehan smirked contemptuously. Mouse was a good description for the tiny man. He hadn't even raised his hands when Brehan had swung. He wondered idly if the kid had ever had a good meal. Then he shrugged, and walked to where the kid was sitting. Might as well try to get

on good terms.

"There was a flat-ear that came to our tribe just recently from the city. Pol. Did you know him?" Brehan sat down across from the other elf.

Jerath didn't look up. "I heard there was a Dalish named Gunther. Do you know him?"

Brehan snorted. "There are a lot of Dalish, I can't know them all."

Jerath turned his gaze on Brehan without actually looking up. "No. I didn't know anyone named Pol."

Brehan caught the annoyed note in the boy's voice, and narrowed his eyes. "You don't have to be rude about it."

"True, what reason would I have to be offended by your assumption I know every 'flat ear' in Ferelden?" Jerath examined the sole of his boot.

Brehan waited a couple minutes for the kid to say something else, but he appeared to be focused on tending to what little gear he had brought with him. Brehan shrugged. "I suppose there are a lot of cities." He smiled warmly, leaning forward. "Did you ever consider coming to the Dalish?"

"Should I have?"

"Didn't you ever want to escape?" Brehan gave him a confused look.

"Escape what?"

Brehan frowned. He would have thought the answer was obvious. What kind of self-respecting elf would actually live in a shem city willingly? The kid finished tending to his boots, then drew them back on. He stood, and walked towards the other side of the camp, where he began checking over the donkey that carried most of their gear.

After a moment, Brehan began to feel irritated. The kid was flat out ignoring him. He rose, and went to where the younger elf was adjusting a strap. "You aren't going to make this easy, are you?"

Jerath sighed. Brehan found himself taken slightly aback as the boy turned and met his eyes. "What is it you want?"

Brehan looked around at the camp, then shook his head. "We are the only elves here."

Jerath arched an eyebrow. "So we should be bosom companions?"

Brehan gestured at where the dwarves were sitting. "Saitada and Brosca seem to get along well enough."

Jerath shook his head. "Neither of them start off conversations by referring to the other as a slur."

"I..." Brehan caught himself. "Oh..." He shook his head. "I... I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"How did you mean it then?"

"It's..." Brehan crossed his arms, then uncrossed them. He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know..." He gave a frustrated sigh. "It's not like I've spent a lot of time around Shems."

He saw the corner of Jerath's mouth twitch. "You probably shouldn't call them Shems."

"Oh?" Brehan asked, then he sighed. "Oh... right. Well, what do I call them then?"

"In my experience, most have names."

Brehan stared at the other man, and felt heat rising on his cheeks. The other man's expression didn't change, but behind him Brehan saw the mageling trying to hide a smile. Brehan glared down at the other elf. "Are you always this sarcastic?"

"Yes."

Brehan stared at him a moment longer, waiting for him to say something else. Jerath just stared back calmly. Brehan threw up his hands. "Ugh!" He stomped away from the camp in frustration. He glanced out over the rise, and stopped short. He grabbed a tree branch and quickly hauled himself up for a better view. "Saitada..."

"Yes?" The dwarf responded.

"I'm not familiar with human customs, but is the castle

supposed to be on fire?"

Saitada looked in the direction he was pointing, then shook her head, "prepare for a fight, people. Looks like there is trouble."

#

An arrow slammed into the tree as Duncan pulled Cathiel to the ground. As the shouting behind them increased, they scrambled to get behind trees. Cathiel risked a quick look. "We are outnumbered almost ten to one," she said. "I don't have that many arrows."

Duncan nodded, and tossed her his daggers. She tucked them into her belt, and readied her bow. Duncan caught the first in the face with a blow from his sword as he came around the tree. Cathiel began picking off the Howe archers, preventing them from getting a clear shot at Duncan, but they began shooting back at her, forcing her to take cover. Duncan took an arrow to the shoulder before he managed to put a tree between himself and the archer, but it would not shelter him long.

He was about to order Cathiel to run, when flames exploded in the midst of the Howe archers. As the archers reeled in surprise, Jerath and Saitada entered the fray on either side of him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Brehan take up a shooting position next to Cathiel, while Brosca stabbed the soldier attempting to sneak up on the archer's position. Lenore sent another burst of fire at the archers, lighting them

up for Cathiel and Brehan.

Saitada caught a blow on her shield, then brought her sword in low. On his other side, Jerath parried a blow with his sword before spinning and driving his knife into his opponent's spine. He yanked it out easily and then flipped it in his hand before throwing it into the eye of an archer taking aim at Lenore.

Duncan smiled to himself as the battle changed from a rout to a victory in the space of seconds. Saitada used her shield to knock the last soldier to the ground before running him through. Lenore emerged from her sheltered position and quickly began to tend to his shoulder.

Saitada glanced at Cathiel, then raised an eyebrow at Duncan. "I take it the situation changed?"

"Indeed. I'm afraid we won't be stopping in Redcliffe. We must make haste for Ostagar."

"We can pack up camp and travel through the night." Saitada responded. "Be well underway before more scouts come."

Duncan nodded, then flexed his shoulder and gave Lenore a brief smile of thanks. "Let's move."

#

Duncan sighed. The sun had risen some time ago, and they could no longer even see the smoke from the burning castle. Cathiel didn't look back. She hadn't said a word to him since

they'd joined up with the others. He'd thought multiple times about saying something to say to her, but instead walked in silence.

He was fortunate, he supposed, that only Saitada picked up on his mood. She waited until the others were distracted to ask.

"You got her out alive."

"I left her father bleeding to death on the floor behind us, after making him give her to the wardens."

"Duncan..."

"Howe's men could have ridden us down and if I'd acted to protect a refugee, I'd be guilty of a crime. The Grey Wardens must remain neutral."

"But you could fight through an army to protect a recruit."

"I should have explained. She wasn't going to leave, she was going to stay there and die trying to get her parents out. And even if she made it, she was focused on Howe. She was going to get herself killed."

"But she would do her duty to her father."

"Yes."

"She'll understand, someday. It's not like you had time for much else. If you'd have been a few steps slower, we might

not have reached you in time. She's got courage and spunk. I think she'll make it through the joining okay."

Duncan starred for a moment at the dwarf. "You know about the joining?"

"Don't worry. I haven't mentioned it to the others. But yes, I know. First I knew you were coming I went to the Shaperate and read up on the wardens. Plenty there between the lines, if you care to look. So many of you come to Orzammar to meet your ends. A few scholars cared enough to ask why."

"And you asked to join anyway."

"A heavy price. I can't go back to Orzammar, but I am still the daughter of their king. I will still do whatever it takes to see my people safe, no matter the cost. And so, I will be a warden. It is my duty. It is yours. And it is hers. If that didn't matter to her, her father's words wouldn't have brought her here either. I have the advantage of being a bit older than she is, but trust me when I say that someday, she will understand."

Duncan nodded. "Orzammar's loss is most definitely my gain."

She smiled. "On your feet, human. At eye level your beard is positively shameful."

Duncan laughed and stood up, brushing himself off. "The elves like my beard."

"Only because they can't grow their own. Not even the most delicate hands could braid that mustache, salroka."

"Saitada?"

"Yes?"

"We can put the word out, see if we can find Gorim."

Saitada shook her head. "I do not think the life of a warden would suit him. He'll be fine."

"That's not what I meant."

She raised an eyebrow, then shook her head and gave a small laugh. "Duncan, there was nothing like that between Gorim and I."

"Oh."

"We had some good times, back when we were barely old enough to have any idea what we were doing. Didn't take us long to realize we made far better friends than lovers. I wish him well, wherever he is." She sighed. "And I'm grateful to Bhelen for giving him a chance at making a new life for himself."

"You are grateful to Bhelan?"

Saitada sighed. "He is still my brother. And, if needs be truth, he will be a better king than Trian. Clearly he plays the game better than I did." She smiled at Duncan's expression. "Maybe

you have to be a dwarf to understand."

"Or a queen," Duncan said quietly.

"I regret Trian's death." She looked towards the others. "But I don't regret being here. With the wardens." She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "With you." She walked back to the others.

Duncan watched her go, and smiled.

20. Chapter 20

Duncan sighed as Jerath casually gathered Brehan's dishes in addition to his own. Once again the young Dalish had left the 'flat-ear' to do the cleaning. Jerath and Brosca engaged briefly in some kind of gesture competition, which Brosca apparently lost, as the dwarf started in on the dishes.

"I suppose it would be unseemly to set his hair on fire."
Lenore grouched from where she was mixing the potion recipe the keeper had given him.

"It would".

"You think he could at least say 'thank you' or something, being that I'm expending my energy keeping him alive instead of, you know, setting him on fire."

Duncan patted the young mage on the shoulder and went to assist Brosca. "Thank you."

"Dishes won't wash themselves."

"For not stabbing Brehan."

"Oh. That. He's not even on the top ten list of biggest arses I've met in the last month."

Duncan smiled, "yes, but as I recall, you did kill several people on that list."

Brosca thought for a moment. "Yeah, I took that into account. But there are a lot of deshyrs back in Orzammar that are still hale and hearty." He glanced back in the direction Brehan had gone. "I'd thump him with the flat of my blade, but I think if that would help you'd already have done it." He collected the dishes Duncan had dried. "I'd be more worried Cathiel, she was talking about pinning ears back and I don't think she was talking about the donkey. Why'd you go and recruit that guy, anyway?"

"Most who contract the darkspawn sickness are dead within a day. Brehan is still walking about and lucid enough to get under everyone's skin. We need that kind of willpower. He has the makings of a Grey Warden."

"Yeah, willpower. That's why half the folks at camp want to turn him into Dalish leather. Willpower. Sure you didn't hit your head during that fight in the roads?"

Duncan hid a smile. "What about Jerath and Saitada?"

"What? Jerath? Bah, Jerath's half made of stone, it would take more than Brehan to get a rise out of that kid. As for Saitada...um... well, I don't see her around camp right now... actually. But she's a commander, she can knock heads around without spilling too many brains."

"Still..."

"Bah, go save the little blighter's life again if you want, I'll finish up here."

Duncan rolled his eyes and headed in the direction he'd seen Brehan go.

#

He saw them ahead, in a clearing. Brehan was on the ground, but Saitada's sword was sheathed. She was using gentle pressure from the point of her shield on Brehan's stomach, keeping the elf on the ground. He could barely make out the words 'in the wilderness if you like, and let your friend go unavenged. Or grow up, and make those bastards pay.'" He stopped moving, watching the situation play itself out.

Brehan tried to sit up and was casually pushed back to the ground. "You're no better than the shem and the flat ear! You had a choice!"

"No wonder Cathiel wants to pin your ears back. It's not like you bother to use these things. None of us had any more choice than you did. You aren't the only one here leaving people behind, you aren't the only one here that will never know. You aren't the only one here that has faced death. What would your friend say, if he could see you now?"

Brehan choked down whatever his initial response was going to be. After a moment, he answered, "he'd be laughing at me for getting pinned to the ground by a girl half my size."

"And what would he be doing now, if your situations were reversed?"

Brehan's voice wavered slightly, "everything he could."

Saitada pulled the shield off Brehan, shifting it to her back. "And what would he think, if he saw you doing less?"

Brehan starred at the ground. "He'd think he died for nothing."

"Did he?"

"No."

Saitada offered Brehan a hand. After a moment, he took it, and she pulled him to his feet. "Going to walk away?"

"No."

"Good. Tomorrow is your turn for the dishes. No more shirking."

Brehan gave a jerky nod, then followed Saitada back to camp. Duncan stepped into the shadows so neither would see him as they passed. He said a silent prayer to the Maker that Saitada would survive the joining.

#

Saitada examined the slate Brosca had handed her. "Excellent work. I think you've got the hang of it."

"Seems like a waste of time though, if you ask me. We are supposed to be warriors, not scholars." His proud smile belied his words.

Saitada laughed warmly. "Much is expected of Grey Wardens. Keeping darkspawn lore is also one of our responsibilities."

Brehan chimed in from where he was adding herbs to the stew over the fire. "Have to leave something for the Grey Wardens that come after us. Not like this will be the last blight."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Lenore said. She selected a few of the herbs he'd retrieved and added them to the potion she was brewing.

"Mage, look around." Brehan gestured at the others sitting around the camp. "Any of us look like the lucky types?"

"You..." Lenore looked around the camp. Brosca gave her a cheeky grin. "...have a fair point. But so does Brosca. Shouldn't we be practicing our darkspawn hunting skills, Duncan?"

"I thought perhaps you might like a meal first," Duncan said. He walked to the donkey and removed a bundle. He laid it out, revealing several practice blades. "I'd like to get a full measure of each of you to determine what additional training will be needed. Saitada will be assisting me in this."

"Why her?" Cathiel asked.

Brosca replied before Duncan could. "Because she was a military commander back in Orzammar, trained by the best. She's won four Provings." He thought for a moment, and then amended. "Five Provings."

"Saitada knows what she is doing, and has faced darkspawn before," Duncan said. "The rest of you will need at least some training, both in darkspawn tactics and in fighting as a military unit."

Lenore clapped her hands. "So will I. I'd be able to help you more with spells if I could anticipate your actions a little better."

"My thoughts exactly," Duncan said. He chose a practice blade. "We will start with some basic footwork drills."

#

Duncan sat at the fire, smiling slightly as Brehan wove a story about Andruil and the way of the hunt. Evenings had become more pleasant of late, since Brehan had begun taking charge of making camp. The elf had a knack for finding foodstuffs even at the pace Duncan set, and between the change from the dried rations and the addition of the storytelling, the others had begun to warm to the Dalish elf. The Dalish, for his part, also seemed happier now that he had found a role within the group.

Saitada sat down next to him and offered him a fresh cup of the tea. He accepted gratefully. "We should be at Ostagar in a week."

"You went out for one recruit and return with six. Not sure if you are lucky or biting off more than you can chew"

"Lucky, I think. Two Proving winners, one of the best archers in Ferelden, a Dalish hunter, and a mage'."

"You didn't mention Jerath in that." Saitada glanced over to where Jerath was engrossed in a tome. "Isn't he a little... well, young?"

Duncan smiled. "Upon meeting me, the rest of you were suitably impressed by my regal bearing and knightly manner." He pretended not to notice Saitada's snort of laughter. "Jerath threatened me."

Around them, the others begin to find their way to tents. Saitada remained sitting next to Duncan. "The others should all be to Ostagar by now as well, yes?"

Duncan nodded. "Twenty three wardens. And two other recruits I found, just before coming to Orzammar."

"Thirty one of us then, against a Blight. Those are some long odds."

"Orlais is sending a couple hundred wardens to join us, though they won't arrive for some time yet."

"With luck, they will be here before the Blight truly gets underway."

"From what we found in the deep roads, the Darkspawn are massing beneath the Korcari wilds. When the horde comes, it will be there."

Saitada sat back against a stump, starrng up at the night sky. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

"I was a pickpocket and thief, back in Orlais. I killed a man while trying to rob him. A Grey Warden, as it turned out. The Commander at that time offered me a place, but I refused. The next day, right before my execution, she conscripted me." He followed her gaze up to the stars. "I ran away many times in the first few months, but eventually I learned what it means to be a Warden."

"Quite the journey, to Commander of the Grey for all Ferelden," she smiled. "It's poetic, in its way, all of us with little left to lose being what stands between the world and darkness."

Duncan was almost surprised to find his fingers running through her hair. She turned to face him, and he kissed her gently. She returned the kiss, raising a hand to caress his face.

They lay entwined beneath the stars for some time before Duncan let out a regretful sigh. Saitada smiled invitingly. "Shall

we turn in?" Duncan nodded, and gave her another kiss before rising. He stopped, abruptly. Saitada stood and followed his gaze.

Jerath still sat by the fire, looking at his book. In spite of them both looking at him, he kept staring at the book, though the tips of his ears were turning a bit pink. Saitada rolled her eyes fondly before heading into the tent. Duncan followed, then glanced back to see that Jerath waited until they were inside before heading to his own bedroll.

#

There were a couple looks the next morning, most of them from Brosca. The rest just seemed to take him and Saitada sharing a tent in stride. Cathiel even looked slightly embarrassed. They packed up the camp quickly.

Brehan ranged a bit from the rest of the group as they headed south. As the sun grew higher, he emerged from the woods carrying a large fowl by the legs. "Found lunch," he said, holding it up.

"Not bad, Songbird," Brosca said.

The Dalish man laughed, and made quick work of gutting and quartering the bird while Brosca built up a fire. Duncan and Saitada took turns instructing the rest on various types of darkspawn as they ate.

21. Chapter 21

"We will be traveling south through the hinterlands to the ruin of Ostagar, on the edges of the Korcari Wilds. The Tevinter Imperium built Ostagar long ago to prevent the Wilders from invading the northern lowlands." Duncan pointed at the ruins just visible in the distance. Barring unforeseen circumstances, they should be there well before sunset.

Lenore gave a low whistle when they actually reached the ruins. "It's taller than it looked."

He nodded to her. "It's fitting we make our stand here, even if we face a different foe within that forest. The king's forces have clashed with the darkspawn several times, but here is where the bulk of the horde will show itself. There are only a few Grey Wardens within Ferelden at the moment, but all of us are here. This blight must be stopped here and now. If it spreads to the north, Ferelden will fall."

They were nearly to the bridge when he heard a familiar voice. "Ho there, Duncan!"

He turned to see a man in ornate armor approaching, attended by several others. "King Cailan? I didn't expect -"

Cailan grinned broadly and spread his hands. "A royal

welcome? I was beginning to worry you'd miss all the fun!"

Next to him, Saitada raised an eyebrow. Duncan stepped forward to greet the king. "Not if I could help it, your majesty." His voice was dry.

Cailan did not appear to notice. "Then I'll have the mighty Duncan at my side in battle after all! Glorious!" He gestured grandly, and then looked past Duncan to his companions. "The other Wardens told me you've found some promising recruits. I take it these are them?"

Duncan shot a look over his shoulder, then bowed formally. "Allow me to introduce you, your Majesty."

The king waved him aside. "No need to be so formal, Duncan. We'll be shedding blood together, after all. Ho there, friends! Might I know your names?"

Saitada crossed her wrists and bowed in the dwarven fashion. Duncan's lips twitched as the former princess stepped forward to address the king. "I am Saitada, your Majesty." She turned, and gestured to the dwarf beside her. "This is Brosca."

Cailan returned her bow. "It's good to see some of the honorable stout folk outside Orzammar."

Duncan hid a wince. Brosca shifted his feet slightly, but Saitada merely smiled. "You must not have met many members of the noble cast," she said, inclining her head.

"Sounds like there's a story behind that. You must regale me with it sometime."

Brosca gave Saitada a questioning look, but nodded. "If your Majesty wishes."

"I do. I'll make sure to have the finest dwarven brew brought up from the palace cellars... after we've dealt with the Blight, of course. I've been to Orzammar. King Endrin invited my father to a Grand Proving, long ago. How does Endrin fare these days?"

"My father was fine when I saw him last," Saitada replied.

Cailan blinked and stuttered slightly. He gave her a look as if he was just now seeing her for the first time. His eyes widened in recognition. "Well... it seems your story may be even more interesting than I suspected."

Saitada nodded. Cailan opened and closed his mouth, then looked over at the others. He blinked again. "You are Bryce's youngest, are you not? I don't think we've ever actually met."

"Yes, your Majesty." Cathiel gave a curtsy. "My name is Cathiel."

"Your brother has already arrived with Highever's men, but we are still awaiting your father."

"He's not coming." Cathiel's voice was quiet. "He died when our castle was taken."

"Dead?! What do you mean?" Cailan turned back to Duncan.
"Duncan, do you know anything about this?"

"Teryn Cousland and his wife are dead, your Majesty. Arl Howe has shown himself a traitor and overtaken Highever Castle. Had we not escaped, he would have killed us and told you any story he wished."

"I... can scarcely believe it! How could he think he would get away with such treachery! As soon as we are done here, I will turn my army north and bring Howe to justice. You have my word."

"Thank you, your Majesty."

Cailan's voice was kind. "No doubt you wish to see your brother. Unfortunately, he and his men are scouting the Wilds."

"I am not eager to tell him, your Majesty."

"Of that, I have no doubt." Cailan sighed. "You will see him again once the battle is over, I am certain. I apologize, but there is nothing more I can do. All I suggest is that you vent your grief against the darkspawn for the time being."

"As long as Arl Howe pays, I'm happy."

Cailan glanced at the two elves, then, somewhat to Duncan's relief, turned back to Duncan. "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I should return to my tent. Loghain waits eagerly to bore me

with his strategies."

"Your uncle sends his greetings and reminds you that Redcliffe forces could be here in less than a week."

"Ha! Eamon just wants in on the glory. We've won three battles against these monsters and tomorrow should be no different."

Saitada gave him a second look. "You sound very confident of that." She flicked her gaze to Duncan, who kept his face steady.

"Overconfident, some would say. Right, Duncan?" Cailan laughed.

"Your majesty, I'm not certain the Blight can be ended quite as... quickly as you might wish." Duncan frowned. Now was not the time to have this discussion again.

"I'm not even sure this is a true Blight. There are plenty of darkspawn on the field, but alas, we've seen no sign of an archdemon." Cailan waved a hand dismissively.

"Disappointed, your Majesty?" Duncan exchanged another look with Saitada. The former princess managed to keep her face straight. Brosca's expression was more dubious.

"I'd hoped for a war like in the tales! A king riding with the fabled Grey Wardens against a tainted god!" He shrugged lightly. "But I suppose this will have to do. I must go before

Loghain sends out a search party. Farewell, Grey Wardens!" The king jerked his head at his entourage as they made their way towards the bridge.

Brehan shot a look at Jerath, then another at Lenore. "So we just get ignored by the nobility?"

Jerath shrugged. "Better that way," he said.

Brehan shook his head. "If you say so."

#

Duncan led them across the bridge. "What the king said is true. They've won several battles against the darkspawn here."

Saitada shook her head, then looked down at the formations. "He didn't seem to take the darkspawn very seriously."

"True. Despite the victories thus far, the darkspawn horde grows larger with each passing day. By now, they look to outnumber us. I know there is an archdemon behind this. But I cannot ask the king to act solely on my feeling."

"What would you have him do?" Saitada asked.

"Wait for reinforcements. We sent a call out west to the Grey Wardens of Orlais, but it will be many days before they can join us. Our numbers in Ferelden are too few. We must do what we can and look to Teryn Loghain to make up the difference. To that end, we should proceed with the Joining

ritual without delay."

Brosca hooked his thumbs behind his weapons. "A hot meal might be nice, first."

Duncan chuckled. "I agree."

Lenore quickened her pace to catch up to him. "What do you mean? What ritual?"

"Every recruit must go through a secret ritual we call the Joining in order to become a Grey Warden. The ritual is brief, but some preparation is required. We must begin soon."

"Why is this ritual so secret?" she asked.

"The Joining is dangerous. I cannot speak more of it except to say that you will learn all in good time. Until then, you must trust that what is done is necessary."

"Is this anything like the Harrowing?"

"It is an ordeal." He glanced back at everyone. "I am sorry that you must endure another so soon."

"Wonderful." Cathiel muttered. "Let's get this over with, then."

"Feel free to explore the camp here as you wish. All I ask is that you do not leave it for the time being. There is another Grey Warden in the camp by the name of Alistair. When you are ready, seek him out and tell him it's time to summon the other recruits." He glanced at Cathiel. "Your hound can stay

with me while I attend to some business. The Grey Warden tent is on the other side of this bridge. You will find us there, should you need to." He watched as they wandered off.

Saitada stayed next to him for a moment. "The king might not be taking this seriously, but someone is. The fortifications are sound enough."

"Loghain's influence," Duncan said. "I wasn't aware you had met Cailan before."

"Maric and Loghain too, for that matter," Saitada replied. "Though I was a child then." She smiled. "For the record, I've also met Empress Celene, and two members of the Magisterium."

"I will keep that in mind. Would you see if you can find Alistair? I need to speak with the mages."

"Of course."

#

Cathiel kept an eye out, but did not see any of Highever's soldiers. They must be in a different camp. She saw a man that matched the description of one of the other recruits attempting to proposition a female soldier. Cathiel hid a smirk as the woman shot him down.

He looked over and waved at her. "Saw you arrive with Duncan." He gave her a once over. "Well, you're not what I

thought you'd be."

"What did you think I'd be?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Not a woman. Yet here you are." His tone was frankly admiring. "The name's Daveth. It's about bloody time you came along. I was beginning to think they'd cooked this ritual up just for our benefit."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Maybe they did."

"Just to give us a good scare?" He shook his head. "No, they don't really seem the type. I happened to be sneaking around camp last night, see, and I heard a couple of Grey Wardens talking. So I listen in for a bit. I'm thinking they plan to send us into the Wilds."

"Aren't there barbarians in the forest?" She thought back to what Aldous had said of the area, and felt a momentary pang for the old man.

"Chasind barbarians, yes. Cannibals. And witches, too! My home village isn't far, and I grew up on tales about the Wilds. Even been in there a few times... scary place."

"This seems like an odd place for an army to camp, then."

"I'm told the Blight started in the forest, so the army's here waiting for them to come out. Dangling meat in front of the bear, if you catch my meaning. It's all too secretive for me." He tapped the side of his nose. "Makes my nose twitch. I

guess we'll have to wait and see. Like we have a choice."

"I wouldn't be here if I did."

"You take what you can get, right?"

"I'll watch your back if you watch mine."

He gave her a friendly leer. "Oh, I'll watch your back."

She laughed. "You're a charmer, I see."

"That's me!" He gestured at the camp, then offered her his arm. She smiled, and accepted.

#

Cathiel smiled at the roguish young man. He filled her in on what he'd overheard sneaking around the warden camp, and she returned the favor by telling him what she'd overheard during her travels.

"I think Saitada knows more than she's letting on, but if she was inclined to tell us, I think she'd have done it by now."

"She's something more than she seems, isn't she? Did you see her greet the king like an equal?"

"According to Brosca, she's the woman who should be ruling Orzammar. Second child of the king, way more popular than the heir apparent."

"Explains why she's here then. Someone wanted her out of the way."

Cathiel fiddle the lock a bit more and it snapped open. "More healing poultices. They really shouldn't be locking these. What if they are needed and nobody can find the key?"

"Good thing we came along." Daveth grinned.

"I bet there is good stuff in the king's tent. Or Loghain's"

"Someone would probably misunderstand our intentions."

"Good point." Cathiel straightened her lockpick. "What about the mage's encampment?"

"Could get us turned into frogs."

"True. Most of the wardens are out and about. Let's see if we can't figure out what this joining thing actually is."

#

Saitada looked up at the tents. She recognized the first sigil as Cailan's, but it took her a moment to recall the other. She walked to the guard, and spoke with him a moment. An older man stepped out of the tent. He blinked at her, then nodded. "Yes, what is it? Ah, you are Duncan's new Grey Warden, I assume."

"Yes I am," Saitada gave him a slight bow. He looked much the same as the last time she'd seen him, over ten years ago.

"Cailan's fascination with Wardens goes beyond the ordinary. Are you aware his father brought your order back to Ferelden?"

"Yes, I've heard that." Cailan had regaled her at length, in fact, to the point she'd seriously considered pushing him into the lava.

"Maric respected the Grey Wardens. They have an honored place in the hearts of our people. But Maric would have understood that it takes more than legends to win a battle. That's not an argument I'll repeat here." He narrowed his eyes at her. "You're no surface dwarf; I can see it in your eyes. Smart of the Grey Wardens to look for new recruits in Orzammar."

"Indeed. I remember you from when King Maric came to Orzammar. The rebel prince and the hero of the River Dane. Quite the legends yourselves."

Loghain blinked down at Saitada, then nodded slowly. "The young princess... Yes, I do remember you. I don't suppose you'll be riding into the thick of battle with the rest of your fellows, will you?"

"I don't know."

"If Cailan has his way, you will. Now I must return to my task. Pray that our king proves amenable to wisdom, if you're the praying sort."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then simply pray."

#

Jerath split away from the others easily. He'd only gone a short way before someone shoved a letter at him and instructed him to run it to the archery range, and be quick about it. Jerath rolled his eyes, but shrugged and headed in that direction. After handing the rangemaster the letter, he was handed a copper in return and called a good lad. He doubted the man had even looked at him.

He started to make his way back towards the center of the camp when he caught sight of a man dressed in fine armor. Rage beat at his senses, and he went still for a moment, forcing it back. The man was walking towards one of the towers. Jerath followed. No one looked at him twice.

The soldier entered the tower, Jerath only a few paces behind. He told the rage to be patient. He let the man get further ahead, dawdling like a lazy servant. The air around them grew a bit cooler as they descended the steps. The man entered a storage room. Here, at last, they were alone. Jerath moved quickly.

Behind him, the door closed with a small thud. The soldier turned around. "Medin send you?" he asked. He shook his head. "Told him I'd take care of it. What's he doing sending a midget knife ear anyway?"

"Medin didn't send me," Jerath said quietly.

"Yeah?" The man shrugged. "Who did?"

"Adaia," Jerath said, and let the rage out.

The soldier screamed.

#

Alistair grinned broadly as he turned and saw her. "You know, one good thing about the Blight is how it brings people together."

Saitada shook her head and returned the smile. "I know exactly what you mean."

"It's like a party: we could all stand in a circle and hold hands." He shrugged. "That would give the darkspawn something to think about."

"Duncan asked me to find you, let you know we've all arrived."

"I heard, before I got shanghaied into delivering messages. Six new recruits."

"We picked up two more after we parted ways in Denerim."

Alistair nodded. "Anyhow, whenever you're ready, let's head back to Duncan. I imagine he's eager to get things started."

#

Saitada met him by the fire, Alistair in tow. Cathiel's mabari was curled up at Duncan's feet, obviously not sharing his mistress's feelings. "Where are the others?" Duncan asked.

"Brehan will be along as soon as he finishes telling a group of very wide-eyed young Fereldans a story of Fen-Harel. Those younglings are more scared of the tale than they are of the darkspawn. I convinced the quartermaster not to arrest Brosca, and he and Lenore are grabbing Ser Jory and will be along in a moment. Daveth and Cathiel are nearly done picking every lock in the camp. Not sure where Jerath got off too, I think he ran into people he knew among the camp laborers. And Alistair is right here."

"Why was the quartermaster arresting Brosca?"

"Something about tricking a messenger into giving him some knight or another's sword."

Duncan started to nod, then replayed the rest of her words. "Wait, Daveth and Cathiel are doing what?"

"Don't worry, they left all the command tents alone. Except yours, but I took the liberty of hiding your lockbox when I realized what they were doing."

"I appreciate that." He rubbed his forehead. "We'll need to have a word or two with them."

"Or at least get them to direct their efforts appropriately. I'd have preferred them to go to the command tents."

Duncan raised an eyebrow.

"Got a feeling. Made the mistake once of not trusting it, not going to happen again. There is an undercurrent here I dislike."

"Lot of men here. Some of the veterans and lords were once on different sides. Plenty of room for tension even without the wild-filled darkspawn nearby."

"I should study up more on human politics. I know more about Calenhad than Cailan."

Brehan joined the fire almost silently. Brosca led Ser Jory and Lenore up a moment later, apparently trying to explain to Lenore what a nug was so she could turn Ser Jory into one. Duncan turned to say something to Alistair, and noticed Jerath sitting quietly near the fire.

Daveth and Cathiel were the last to arrive, talking quietly to each other. Saitada glanced at them curiously when they approached. "You two find anything interesting?"

Daveth started, but Cathiel just responded, "some of the supply dispensations don't make sense."

Saitada nodded. "Aye, but we don't know the actual battleplan yet." Cathiel started to open her mouth. "But you've got an odd feeling too?" Cathiel just nodded.

Duncan frowned. "One of you might be wrong. Two... I'll see

what more I can learn. In the meantime, there is a task ahead of you." He explained.

"Vials of blood and the treaties?" Saitada confirmed. "We can do that."

"Watch over your charges, Alistair, and bring them back safely." Alistair nodded in response. Duncan made eye contact with Saitada, who winked and also nodded.

22. Chapter 22

The wolves weren't much of a threat, though Brehan was surprised they'd attacked at all. Perhaps the presence of so many darkspawn was affecting the local fauna. They rescued an injured soldier, Lenore healing him enough to enable him to make it back to camp. They hadn't gone much further when Alistair's head came up. "Darkspawn nearby," he said.

Saitada scanned the area. "There," she said, pointing at the figures moving on a nearby hill.

Cathiel unslung her bow. "I see them. How do you want to do this?"

Saitada considered a moment. "You and Daveth stay back with Lenore, stick to the bows. Alistair, Brosca, and myself will go from the right, Brehan, Jerath, and Jory hit them from the left. Lenore, let's see what those spells of yours can do. Send them to us."

Lenore smiled, and stepped back to between Daveth and Cathiel, both of whom readied their bows. Jory glanced back at the elves before assuming the lead. Brehan followed, letting Jerath take up the rear. He shifted the axe, getting ready to strike.

The fire spell hit the ones on the top of the hill, scattering the rest to come at them. Brehan stepped up to Jory's left, and the two of them went to work with mighty swings, taking out the three darkspawn fleeing the fire. Jory laughed, his expression a bit cocky. "Not so tough as all that, are they?" Brehan was about to agree when he heard the growling behind him.

He turned in time to see Jerath's blade remove the top of a genlock's head before it could bring its crossbow to bear. Four others lay at the shorter elf's feet.

Jerath was already wiping the blood from his weapons when Brehan and Jory reached him.

Jory's jaw was practically dragging on the ground. "Where does an elf learn to fight like that?"

Jerath shrugged, and bent to a genlock whose throat he'd cut, carefully collecting the still flowing blood into a vial. Saitada and the others came around to their side of the hill. "We got four," Saitada called out. "Daveth, Cathiel, and Lenore got one each. How many did you get?"

Brehan looked around at the bodies. "Eight."

Saitada gave him an impressed look. "Not bad for our first outing. Fill your vials, and lets go find the scrolls."

Jerath wordlessly handed over the vial he'd finished to Brehan before filling the remaining two. Jory gave him another look

before falling in behind Saitada. Brehan hesitated, waiting for Jerath to finish his task.

"Yes?" Jerath asked.

"Um... where does an elf learn to fight like that?"

"Denerim, obviously." He placed the two vials into his belt pouch, and headed after the others.

Brehan followed, shaking his head slightly. "That's not really an answer to the question."

"Isn't it?"

"There has to be a better story than just 'I'm from Denerim'."

"Why?"

"Uh..." Brehan shook his head. "What kind of a place is Denerim?"

"Human, mostly."

"That's not what I... is that?" Brehan sighed in vexation. "Fine. I'll ask Duncan then." He started after the others, then stopped again, and turned back to the smaller man. "In the barn. You let me hit you."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Doesn't matter."

"You can kill five darkspawn before I can even turn around, but you let me punch you in the face. Why?"

"I'm supposed to hurt darkspawn," Jerath replied. He walked past Brehan and followed the others.

Brehan shook his head, and looked once more at the corpses Jerath had left behind. Then he followed his companions.

#

They encountered another large group of darkspawn. Saitada called the tactics, and the band cut through easily under her direction. The darkspawn had fallen on a pair of soldiers earlier. Lenore wrinkled her nose at the condition of the bodies. One of them had been clutching a scroll case. Curious, she opened it. A parchment and a small bag of ashes fell into her hand. Quickly, she scanned the parchment.

"What you got there?" Brosca asked.

"A story of some kind. These men were looking for some stones."

Brosca raised an eyebrow. "Any stones in particular?"

"A cairn of some kind," Lenore said. She tucked the ashes into her belt pouch, then looked over at the others. Saitada was filling the last vial.

"What the hell kind of treasure would get these dusters wandering around spawn?" Brosca asked.

Lenore grinned. "Shall we find out?" She pointed towards the top of the hill, where a pile of stones was visible.

Brosca looked over towards the others. He caught Saitada's eye, then jerked his head towards the hill. She gave him a nod, then gestured for Jerath and Brehan to follow.

Hiking her robes up a bit, Lenore headed up the hill. There were ashes on the stones, and she bent to take a closer look. There was a faint aura of magic around the stones, like nothing she'd seen before. From her belt pouch she withdrew the container of ashes, then sprinkled them over the ashes. There was a faint surge of energy, and then nothing. Brosca raised his eyebrow at her. "Well?"

"I'm not certain." She straightened, then turned towards the elves. Her eyes widened and she stepped backwards.

Jerath and Brehan turned immediately to see what she was looking at. "Fenedis," Brehan swore, as the demon surged towards them.

"Who summons Gazarath?" The demon's voice groaned as it aimed a blow at a dumbstruck Brehan. Jerath tackled the taller elf out of the way and rolled back to his feet.

Lenore fumbled for her staff as the demon started to come towards where she and Brosca were standing. Below, she

could see the others start charging up the hill. Jerath slashed his sword across the demon's back, and the thing whirled on him, striking out with long, razor sharp claws. He ducked back, and Brosca took the opportunity to leap forward and smash his mace into the thing. When it whirled on the dwarf, Jerath closed in again. When it whirled towards him, Brosca and Lenore hit it simultaneously, him with a mace and her with a blast of ice to the head. It fell, tearing apart and vanishing as it did. Something clinked as it hit the ground.

"What the hell was that?" Saitada asked as they others reached them.

"A demon," Lenore said.

"Where'd it come from?"

"Um..." Lenore glanced back at the stones, then to Saitada. "I think I might have summoned it."

Saitada stared at her. "Why?"

"I didn't know what was going to happen," Lenore said.

Jerath bent and picked something up from the remains of the demon. The blade was ornately hilted, and the blade was traced with elegant runes. He held it in front of him, revealing it was actually a few inches longer than he was tall.

Brosca let out a low whistle. "I'm guessing that's what those dusters thought was worth dyin for."

Saitada rubbed her forehead. "Lenore, in the future, could you please let us know before you potentially summon horrors from the beyond?"

"Yes," Lenore said brightly.

#

"Why are you picking flowers?" Alistair asked.

"Numin'lin," Brehan said. "Juice from the petals can be made into an ointment that helps treat blight sickness." He pointed. "Elfroot. Treats just about anything. And Deathroot, does pretty much the opposite of elfroot." He shrugged at the other man. "Mostly force of habit."

"And what's that one?" Alistair asked as Brehan casually dug out a root without visibly slowing his pace.

"Ginger. Tastes good."

"Ah. You uh... don't ever get them confused, right?"

"You won't find a living soul that has complained about my cooking," Brehan said.

Alistair snorted.

Saitada held up a hand, then pointed. "Those ruins. I think that's what we are looking for."

"Matches the description," Alistair said.

"Any spawn?"

Alistair cast out his senses, then shook his head. "None close."

Saitada nodded. "Stay together, keep an eye out. Sooner we get these treaties, the sooner we can get warm."

#

Saitada approached the box. The lid was broken, and caved in. A quick search revealed the contents had either been lost to time or removed. She started to stand up when she caught sight of a figure standing on the age-worn steps. The figure started walking towards them. "Well, well, what have we here? Are you a vulture, I wonder? A scavenger poking amidst a corpse whose bones were long since cleaned? Or merely an intruder, come into these darkspawn-filled Wilds of mine in search of easy prey? What say you, hmm? Scavenger or intruder?"

She rose, and moved to stand in front of the others. "We are neither. The Grey Wardens once owned this tower."

The woman held out her hand and gestured at the ruins. "'Tis a tower no longer. The Wilds have obviously claimed this desiccated corpse." She continued descending the stairs. "I have watched your progress for some time. "Where do they go," I wondered, "why are they here?" And now you disturb ashes none have touched for so long. Why is that?"

"Don't answer her," Alistair said in a loud whisper. "She looks Chasind, and that means others may be nearby."

The woman gave a contemptuous sweep of her hands. "You fear barbarians will swoop down upon you?"

"Yes, swooping is bad." Alistair rolled his eyes.

Daveth's voice held a note of panic. "She's a Witch of the Wilds, she is! She'll turn us into toads!"

"Witch of the Wilds? Such idle fancies, those legends. Have you no minds of your own?" She shook her head and smirked. "You there. Elves are not frightened little boys. Tell me your name and I shall tell you mine."

"I am Jerath." He gave her a polite nod. "A pleasure to meet you."

She smiled. "Now that is a proper civil greeting, even here in the Wilds. You," she said, looking directly at him. "May call me Morrigan." She looked back towards Saitada. "Shall I guess your purpose? You sought something in that chest, something that is here no longer?"

Alistair shook his head. "'Here no longer?' You stole them, didn't you? You're... some kind of... sneaky..." He frowned, then continued. "Witch-thief!"

"How very eloquent. How does one steal from dead men?"

"Quite easily, it seems. Those documents are Grey Warden

property, and I suggest you return them."

"I will not, for 'twas not I who removed them. Invoke a name that means nothing here any longer if you wish; I am not threatened."

Saitada held up a hand to forestall Alistair. "Your mother?"

"Yes, my mother. Did you assume I spawned from a log?"

"A thieving, weird-talking log, perhaps," Alistair said.

"Not all in the Wilds are monsters. Flowers grow, as well as toads."

Saitada rubbed her forehead. "I want an honest answer; Are you a Witch of the Wilds?"

"Have I been dishonest?" Morrigan arched an eyebrow, then gestured dismissively. "Some call us witches, yes, but purely out of superstition."

"You know what the Circle of Magi is, don't you? The Circle requires an accounting of all mages. That is the law of the land and the Chantry." Alistair folded his arms.

Morrigan merely smirked. "If you wish to tell your Chantry about me, go ahead. I have nothing to fear from priests."

Saitada glanced back towards the others. Jerath shrugged, then looked to Morrigan and asked, "can you take us to your mother?"

"There is a sensible request." Morrigan smiled. "I like you."

Alistair aimed an elbow at Jerath, which the young man neatly avoided. "I'd be careful. First it's, 'I like you...' but then 'zap!' Frog time."

"She'll put us all in the pot, she will. Just you watch," Daveth said.

Jory shrugged. "If the pot's warmer than this forest, it'd be a nice change."

"Follow me, then, if it pleases you." Morrigan began walking. Jerath followed. Saitada glanced aback at the others. Lenore shrugged. Brehan was staring after the witch, a curious expression on his face. Saitada sighed, then followed after the elf.

#

"Witch of the wilds?" Saitada asked, looking up at Brehan.

"I suggest we tread very carefully," Brehan said.

"Then the name does mean something to you?"

"If it is Asha'bellenar, those who anger her have a tendency to end up in pieces, decorating her trees," Brehan replied. "She is not friend to the Dalish, but neither is she enemy. Our keeper's instructions regarding her were very clear. Be polite, do as she says, and then run like the Dread Wolf was on your heels."

"Well, you're just a bundle of laughs," Brosca muttered.

#

Morrigan emerged from the woods into a clearing that contained a small, slightly listing hut. An old woman, spindly with age, stood nearby, examining the small flowers on a strange looking bush. "Greetings, Mother. I bring before you Grey Wardens who -"

"I see them, girl." The woman's yellow eyes looked them over sharply. "Mmm. Much as I expected."

"Are we supposed to believe you were expecting us?" Alistair glanced at Saitada, his face clearly stating he was less than impressed.

"You are required to do nothing, least of all believe. Shut one's eyes tight or open one's arms wide..." The old woman flopped a hand up and then down again. "Either way, one's a fool."

"She's a witch, I tell you! We shouldn't be talking to her!"

"Quiet, Daveth! If she's really a witch, do you want to make her mad?" Jory asked, glancing at Brehan.

"There is a smart lad. Sadly irrelevant to the larger scheme of things, but it is not I who decides. Believe what you will. And what of you?" She narrowed her eyes at Saitada.

Saitada sighed. "I believe you're crazy and possibly

dangerous."

"Is that all? Surely your mind stretches farther than these surroundings? And you?" She glanced first at Jerath, then at Brehan. "Does your elven mind give you a different viewpoint? What do you believe?"

Brehan shifted his weight from side to side. Jerath answered. "Believed or not, some things must be accepted."

A strange expression crossed the old woman's face, and she barked a laugh. "Tere lies the answer I hoped to get. An open mind, yet not made of mush. Am I simply complimenting you? Wait and see! So much about you is uncertain..." She cocked her head at him. "And yet I believe." She looked to the side. "Do I?" She looked back at them, and showed a hint of teeth. "Why, it seems I do!"

"So this is a dreaded Witch of the Wilds?" Alistair asked, elbowing Brehan.

"Witch of the Wilds, eh? Morrigan must have told you that. She fancies such tales, though she would never admit it! Oh, how she dances under the moon!" The old woman laughed.

Morrigan rubbed her forehead. "They did not come to listen to your wild tales, Mother."

The old woman's tone became brisk. "True, they came for their treaties, yes?" She held out a scroll case. "And before you begin barking, your precious seal wore off long ago. I

have protected these."

"You..." Alistair started to object before processing her words. "Oh. You protected them?"

"And why not?" she asked, as Saitada took the scrolls from her. "Take them to your Grey Wardens and tell them this Blight's threat is greater than they realize!"

"What do you mean the threat is greater than they realize?" Lenore asked.

"Either the threat is more or they realize less." The old woman shrugged, her voice impatient. "Or perhaps the threat is nothing! Or perhaps they realize nothing!" She laughed again.

"How do you know all this?" Lenore asked.

"Do I? Perhaps I am simply an old woman with a penchant for moldy parchments." Her laughter was mocking now.

Saitada frowned in irritation. "I'm sure they'll be eager to act on your advice."

"Well, I cannot be responsible for their doubts. I would go mad!" She cocked her head to the side. "Or am I already?" Her laughter rang out again.

"Thank you for returning them," Jerath gave her a slight bow.

Her laughter stopped, and she gave him another odd look. "Such manners! Always in the last place you look. Like

stockings!" She shook her head. "Oh, do not mind me. You have what you came for!"

"Time for you to go, then," Morrigan said, giving them a shooing gesture.

The old woman scoffed. "Do not be ridiculous, girl. These are your guests."

"Oh, very well. I will show you out of the woods. Follow me." Morrigan began striding back the direction they had come.

#

After Morrigan left them at the edge of the woods, Saitada again raised an eyebrow at Brehan. "You've been quiet."

"I dislike this," he said.

Brosca snorted. "Are Dalish really scared of that nutty old bat?"

"She was a mage," Lenore said. "I could tell that much. So was Morrigan, that staff of hers had power."

"Apostates," Alistair said. "We should mention them to the templars."

"Waste of time," Brosca said. "We've got bigger things to worry about, and with spawn all over the place, so do they."

"A fair point," Saitada said. She looked down at the scroll

case. "We have what we needed, anyway. Let's go get the rest of this over with."

23. Chapter 23

Saitada filled Duncan in on the events in the wild. Alistair interjected occasionally. Duncan raised an eyebrow when they got to the part about the scrolls and the two women. "Were they wilder folk?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Alistair replied. "They might be apostates." He glanced at Saitada. "Mages hiding from the Chantry."

Duncan shook his head. "I know you were once a templar, Alistair, but Chantry business is not ours. We have the scrolls; let us focus on the Joining."

Saitada glanced towards where the others were standing, replaying various fights to each other. "Think anyone is going to have second thoughts?" she asked.

Duncan sighed. "They are not volunteers. Whether conscripted or recruited, they were chosen because they are needed." His voice became serious. "There is no turning back now. They must gather their courage for what comes next."

Daveth blinked as Duncan's words caught his attention. "Courage? How much danger are we in?"

"I will not lie," Duncan said. "We Grey Wardens pay a heavy

price to become what we are. Fate may decree you pay your price now rather than later."

Lenore blinked. "You're saying this ritual can kill us?"

"As could any darkspawn you might face in battle. You would not have been chosen, however, if I did not think you had a chance to survive."

Daveth fidgeted. "Let's go, then. I'm anxious to see this Joining now."

Jory swallowed. "I agree. Let's have it done." Slowly, the others started to nod agreement.

"Then let us begin," Duncan said. "Alistair, take them to the old temple. We will begin at sunset."

#

Brehan built up a small fire. Brosca rummaged in his bag for a bottle, then offered it to Alistair. "What can you tell us about this Joining?"

"Try not to worry about it." Alistair accepted the bottle and took a drink. He blanched, then offered the bottle back. "It will..." He coughed, and his voice returned to normal. "Just distract you."

Brosca took a drink. "Could do with a distraction."

Alistair cocked his head towards Cathiel. "You know... it just

occurred to me that there have never been many women in the Grey Wardens. I wonder why that is?"

Cathiel shrugged. "Probably because we're too smart for you."

Alistair snorted. "True. But if you're here, what does that make you?"

"Just one of the boys?" Cathiel offered.

Daveth laughed. Alistair shook his head. "Sad, isn't it? I know Brosca and Saitada have fought darkspawn before. What about the rest of you? First time?" He glanced at Brehan. "Well, not for you, I suppose."

Brehan shrugged. Lenore nodded. "They are... somehow worse than I pictured."

"When I fought my first one, I wasn't prepared for how monstrous it was. Still, this is better than memorizing yet another verse from the chant."

Brosca grinned at Alistair, "sounds like being a warden is a dream come true for you."

Alistair smiled back. "What about you?"

"My mother told a few tales when she was sober. Bold heroes, worthy of being claimed by the stone. I admit a dream or two, I think most dusters do."

"Not just dusters," Saitada winked, snagging the bottle from him and taking a drink before passing it on.

Brehan sighed. "I admit, back when I was a kid, I thought being a Grey Warden would be a noble calling. Though I wasn't entirely convinced they actually existed."

Cathiel nodded. "Swooping in on a griffin, saving the world..."

Lenore grinned and took a drink out of the bottle, and almost immediately started coughing. "They are good stories. I dreamed of being a warden sometimes. Or a pirate. Or a warden pirate." She passed the bottle to Jerath. "What about you? Did you dream of being a warden when you were a kid? Well, when you were a younger kid, anyway?"

Jerath shook his head. "I wanted to be a blacksmith." He passed the bottle to Daveth without taking a drink.

Daveth shook his head. "Blacksmithing is boring. Now, Warden-Pirate! That sounds fun. We should do that after this blight business is done."

#

Brosca shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"Nervous?" Lenore asked. He nodded. "Me too. I've read a lot of stories about Grey Wardens, but I don't recall this 'joining' ever being mentioned."

"You asked Duncan if it was like a... what was it..."

"Harrowing?" Brosca hopped up onto the ledge to sit next to her.

"Harrowing is the test given to mages to see if they have what it takes to control their abilities. To become more than apprentices." She wrinkled her nose at the memory.

"Reckon the joining probably is the same kind of thing."

"I hope not, I had to fight a demon."

"Er... huh... well, I guess that's not so bad." He shrugged. "I mean, we already did that once today, and it worked out alright. Here I was all nervous that they were going to make it a spelling test."

Lenore laughed.

#

Brehan glanced over at Saitada. "You know what's next, don't you?"

"A vague idea, only," Saitada said. That was true enough. She'd considered asking Duncan for more details, but had decided against it. There were better uses for pillowtalk than discussions of darkspawn.

"What are they testing us for? I'm tired of waiting. It's..." He scratched at his arm. "This is the thing Duncan said could cure me."

Saitada smiled gently at the elf. "It will be over soon enough."

Brehan nodded before going back to pacing.

Saitada walked over to where Jerath sat on the ledge overlooking the Korcari wilds. The kid appeared calm enough. "Nice view," she said.

Jerath pointed to the southeast. "From here you can just make out those two statues, where we found that blade Brehan likes so much."

Saitada smiled. "I'll take your word for it. All that open air still makes me a bit queasy. Still odd sometimes, to look up and see sky." She glanced over her shoulder at where all the others were engaged in some form or another of fidgeting. "You don't seem as nervous as the others."

"Should I be?"

"That's what I was going to ask you." She gave him an appraising look. Until their latest venture into the wilds, she'd been considering talking Duncan out of putting the kid through the Joining. He'd proved he could handle himself. For that matter, he'd proved he could likely handle any of the rest of them as well.

"All Grey Wardens go through this. If I accept tomorrow's battle, why should I fear this ritual?"

"That's... a very good point, actually. What's a ceremony

compared to a darkspawn horde? Though you don't seem nervous about the battle either."

"Will being afraid change anything?"

"I suppose not."

"A blade will break, or be sheathed to fight again another day. Either way, the battle goes on, and it is not the blade that decides."

"An elfish saying?"

"No." He went silent for a moment, then nodded at the horizon. "There, sunset."

"Well, let's get ready then."

#

Jory's pacing was becoming more desperate. "The more I hear about this Joining, the less I like it."

"Are you blubbering again?" Daveth asked. He gave an annoyed shake of his head.

Jory kicked at a rock. "Why all these damned tests? Have I not earned my place?"

"Maybe it's tradition." Daveth smirked. "Maybe they're just trying to annoy you."

"Calm down," Brosca said. "There's nothing we can do about it now."

"I only know that my wife is in Highever with a child on the way. If they had warned me... it just doesn't seem fair." He kicked another rock.

"Would you have come if they'd warned you? Maybe that's why they don't. The Wardens do what they must, right?" Daveth asked.

"Including sacrificing us?" Jory shook his head.

Daveth glared at him. "I'd sacrifice a lot more if I knew it would end the Blight."

"You make a good point," Jerath said quietly.

Daveth nodded at him, then looked back at Jory. "You saw those darkspawn, ser knight. Wouldn't you die to protect your pretty wife from them?"

"I..."

Daveth cut him off. "Maybe you'll die. Maybe we'll all die. If nobody stops the darkspawn, we'll die for sure."

Jory stared at him, then shook his head again. "I've just never faced a foe I could not engage with my blade."

#

"At last we come to the Joining. The Grey Wardens were founded during the first Blight, when humanity stood on the verge of annihilation. So it was then that the first Grey Wardens drank of darkspawn blood and mastered their taint." Duncan's voice was calm as he spoke the ceremonial words.

Jory blanched. "We're going to drink the blood of those... those creatures?"

"As the first Grey Wardens did before us, as we did before you. This is the source of our power and our victory."

Alistair nodded. "Those who survive the Joining become immune to the taint. We can sense it in the darkspawn and use it to slay the archdemon."

"Those who survive?" Broasca folded his arms, then unfolded them, then folded them again.

"Not all who drink the blood will survive and those who do are forever changed. This is why the Joining is a secret. It is the price we pay. We speak only a few words prior to the Joining, but these words have been said since the first. Alistair, if you would?" Duncan stepped back, and began pouring black liquid into a silver chalice.

Alistair bowed his head. "Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we stand, vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten and that one day, we shall join you."

Duncan held out the chalice. "Daveth, step forward."

Daveth glanced at the others, then stepped forward and took the chalice. He took a deep breath, then put the cup to his lips and drank. Duncan caught the chalice as it fell from Daveth's hands. Daveth staggered as his eyes rolled back into his head. He put a hand to his throat, then collapsed to his knees as bloody froth began to pour from his lips. Cathiel gasped, and turned away. Alistair put a hand on her shoulder, and she buried her face in his chest.

"Maker's breath!" Jory cursed.

Duncan's face was pained. "I am sorry, Daveth." Daveth twitched, and jerked once more before going still. Duncan poured more of the black liquid into the cup. "Step forward, Jory."

"But... I have a wife. A child! Had I known..."

"There is no turning back," Duncan said.

"No! You ask too much!" Jory put a hand to his sword. "There is no glory in this." He drew the blade, and started to swing. Duncan's own blade drove up under the man's ribcage. Jory gasped once as he died.

Duncan withdrew the blade, then turned to the others. His face was grim. "I am sorry. But the Joining is not yet complete." He looked over their faces. "You are called upon to submit yourself to the taint for the greater good."

Jerath stepped forward, and took the goblet from Duncan. He drank, and started to hand it back. He staggered, and Duncan caught the chalice. Jerath's eyes seemed to go white as he collapsed to his knees, and then fell bonelessly to one side. Duncan smiled. "From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden." His eyes went to the dwarven woman. "Saitada, step forth..."

#

Jerath opened his eyes and stirred slightly. Duncan came over to kneel beside him. "It is finished. Welcome." He offered a hand, and Jerath let him pull him to his feet.

"Two more deaths." Alistair shook his head. "In my Joining, only one of us died, but it was... horrible."

"How do you feel?" Duncan gave him a concerned look.

"I'm over. It's fine." Jerath nodded to where Saitada was starting to stir, and Duncan immediately went to the dwarf's side. Jerath could see relief on the older warden's face as Saitada's eyes opened.

Alistair went to assist Cathiel. Brosca started to stir, and Jerath went to offer him a hand up. Brehan sat up, shaking his head in confusion. Lenore put a hand up over her face, and groaned.

Alistair gave her a sympathetic look. "Did you have dreams? I had terrible dreams after my Joining."

"Such dreams come when you begin to sense the darkspawn, as we all do. That and many other things can be explained in the months to come." Duncan looked them over.

Jerath looked around. The fire had burned down, and the bodies of Jory and Daveth were nowhere to be seen. They'd been unconscious for some time.

Alistair dug into his belt pouch. "Before I forget, there is one last part to your Joining. We take some of that blood and put it in a pendant. Something to remind us..." He sighed. "Of those who didn't make it this far."

"Take some time," Duncan advised.

#

Duncan began walking back towards the warden camp. Saitada caught up with him, and grabbed his hand. "Duncan, about Ser Jory... Are you okay?"

Duncan nodded. "He didn't leave me much of a choice."

"I know," she said.

He smiled down at her. "Thank you," he said.

"You didn't eat, earlier," she said. She pulled his hand. "Come, I think you could use a drink."

He smiled, and walked with her down the stairs.

#

Brehan stared out over the ledge, his eyes unfocused. "There are so many of them out there."

"Huh... I don't sense anything," Brosca said. "Except what I think is you guys. That's... kind of interesting." He suddenly frowned. "How the hell am I supposed to sneak up on any of you now?"

Alistair laughed. "I'm told the range we can sense varies somewhat from Warden to Warden."

Brehan shook his head. "It's like having a foul taste in your mouth."

"Well then, I ain't gonna envy you," Brosca said.

Lenore gave Brehan a worried look. "How are you feeling now?"

"No more bugs under the skin. I think that's good." Brehan frowned, then nodded. "I can block them out, a bit. That's also good."

Cathiel shivered. "So, we are wardens now?"

"Yes," Alistair said.

"Great," she said. She fingered an arrow in her quiver.

"Great," she repeated. "Now what?"

"Now, we kill darkspawn," Brosca said. "Save the world. Be big heroes. Let people buy us drinks and tell us how wonderful we are."

A soldier approached. "Wardens," he said, giving them a nod. "Do you have a moment?"

Alistair nodded. "What's wrong?"

"I've been asked to let you know that a darkspawn may have managed to get into the camp."

Alistair raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

"A soldier was killed. Torn up something awful."

Alistair glanced at the rest of them. "Shall we do a quick patrol, see if we can find anything?"

Lenore nodded. "Might as well. Better than just sitting here."

Alistair nodded. "Brosca, you, Jerath, and Brehan go north. Cathiel, Lenore, and I will go south. We'll meet back up at the campfire."

"How come you're taking the pretty girls and I'm stuck with the elves?" Brosca asked.

"I'm senior warden," Alistair replied with a cheeky grin.

#

Lenore followed Alistair back to the campfire. She was almost standing next to Duncan before she could sense him. A dejected sigh escaped her. Duncan raised an eyebrow. "Something wrong?"

"Alistair started sensing you from all the way back there," she said, waving her hand. "Cathiel only had to take a couple more paces. If I step back ten feet I won't sense you at all."

"It varies for each warden," Duncan said. He looked up as he sensed the others approaching.

Lenore caught the action. "You sensed them, and which way they were." She kicked a rock and sat down on the log that was serving as a bench.

"I guess you'll have to content yourself with being able to rain lightning down on everything," Saitada said, patting her on the shoulder.

Lenore let out a long suffering sigh. "I suppose."

Alistair chuckled, then looked up at Duncan. "Despite the report, we've sensed no darkspawn in the camp."

Duncan nodded. He waited for the others to arrive. "What of you? Sense anything?"

Jerath and Brosca shook their heads. Brehan smiled. "I can almost pick out which of you is which," he reported.

"I hate him," Lenore said. "I'm going to set him on fire."

Duncan just shook his head. "Saitada, when you are ready, I'd like you to accompany me to a meeting with the king."

Saitada stood up. "What kind of meeting?"

"The king is discussing strategy for the upcoming battle. The meeting is so the west, down the stairs. Please attend as soon as you are able."

#

"Loghain, my decision is final. I will stand by the Grey Wardens in this assault."

"You risk too much, Cailan! The darkspawn horde is too dangerous for you to be playing hero on the front lines."

Cailan shook his head. "If that's the case, perhaps we should wait for the Orlesian forces to join us, after all."

Saitada saw anger flash on Loghain's face. He gritted his teeth, forcing the words out. "I must repeat my protest to your fool notion that we need the Orlesians to defend ourselves!"

"It's not a 'fool notion'. Our arguments with the Orlesians are a thing of the past..." Cailan drew himself up, for a moment reminding her of Trian when he had his back up. "And you will remember who is king."

"How fortunate Maric did not live to see his son ready to hand Ferelden over to those who enslaved us for a century!"
Loghain folded his arms.

"Then our current forces will have to suffice, won't they?" Cailan's voice was almost petulant. He turned towards her and Duncan. "Duncan, are your men ready for battle?"

"They are, your majesty."

"My lady," Cailan inclined his head to Saitada. "I understand congratulations are in order."

"Thank you, your majesty," Saitada replied.

"Every Grey Warden is needed now. You should be honored to join their ranks."

Loghain pinched the bridge of his nose. "Your fascination with glory and legends will be your undoing, Cailan. We must attend to reality."

Cailan all but threw up his hands. "Fine. Speak your strategy. The Grey Wardens and I draw the darkspawn into charging our lines and then...?"

Loghain gestured at the map on the table. "You will alert the tower to light the beacon, signaling my men to charge from cover."

"To flank the darkspawn, I remember," Cailan interrupted. "This is the Tower of Ishal in the ruins, yes? Who shall light this beacon?"

"I have a few men stationed there. It's not a dangerous task, but it is vital."

"Then we should send our best. Send Alistair and the new Grey Wardens to make sure it's done."

Saitada blinked, then glanced at Duncan. Duncan narrowed his eyes slightly. She had a feeling there was more to the king's order than he was saying. "I'll do my best, your Majesty," she said.

"You rely on these Grey Wardens too much. Is that truly wise?" Loghain asked.

"Enough of your conspiracy theories, Loghain. Grey Wardens battle the Blight, no matter where they're from."

Duncan gave Cailan a respectful nod. "Your majesty, you should consider the possibility of the archdemon appearing."

Loghain shook his head. "There have been no signs of any dragons in the Wilds."

Cailan shrugged. "Isn't that what your men are here for, Duncan?"

"I..." Duncan's face became resigned. "Yes, your Majesty."

Saitada watched a brief argument between a mage and a cleric, and idly agreed with the mage. Sending seven wardens to light a fire seemed foolish.

"Enough!" Loghain's voice put a halt to the argument. "This plan will suffice. The Grey Wardens will light the beacon."

"Thank you, Loghain." Excitement shone on Cailan's face. "I cannot wait for that glorious moment! The Grey Wardens battle beside the king of Ferelden to stem the tide of evil!"

"Yes, Cailan. A glorious moment for us all."

#

As they walked back from the council to find the others, Saitada sighed. "Hammer and anvil, fairly basic stuff..."

"But?"

"The supply lines aren't positioned right for it. The anvil is woefully under supplied, especially if the Darkspawn manage any kind of siege position."

Duncan frowned, and played the battle through in his head. "I see what you mean, the anvil won't be able to hold out very long. But it's a large hammer. And no archdemon in the field, perhaps they are holding the supplies in reserve."

"You'll be with the king?"

"Yes."

"In the anvil?"

Duncan glanced down at the dwarf. "Yes."

"Surely not all of us are needed at the tower. I'd feel better if..."

"The king has given an order."

Saitada sighed. "The king is young."

Duncan raised an eyebrow at Saitada, who smiled and responded, "Dwarves grow up fast." Her smile became a frown. "The last time I got sidelined like this, I ended up exiled."

"Ah, but we are far from the politics of Orzammar here, and you have no brothers to interfere this time."

"True." She started up the stairs, and Duncan took advantage of the height they added to kiss her. She ran her fingers through his beard and murmured softly, "okay, maybe I could braid it."

He laughed.

#

"You and Alistair will go to the Tower of Ishal and ensure the beacon is lit," Duncan said as they reached the other new wardens.

Alistair's face grew confused. "What? I won't be in the battle?"

Brosca wrinkled his nose. "What kind of sodding beacon needs seven wardens?"

Duncan laid a hand on Alistair's shoulder. "This is by the king's

personal request, Alistair." His tone was almost fatherly. "If the beacon is not lit, Teryn Loghain's men won't know when to charge."

"So he needs seven Grey Wardens standing up there holding the torch. Just in case, right?"

Cathiel shook her head. "I agree with Alistair. We should be in the battle."

"That is not your choice," Duncan said firmly. "If King Cailan wishes Grey Wardens to ensure the beacon is lit, then Grey Wardens will be there." He looked them over. "We must do whatever it takes to destroy the darkspawn... exciting or no."

Alistair sighed. "I get it. I get it. Just so you know, if the king ever asks me to put on a dress and dance the Remigold, I'm drawing the line. Darkspawn or no."

Cathiel gave him an appraising look. "I think I'd like to see that."

He grinned at her. "For you, maybe. But it has to be a pretty dress."

Brehan laughed. "I don't know. That could be a great distraction."

"Me shimmying down the darkspawn line? Sure, we could kill them while they roll around laughing."

Duncan and Saitada exchanged an eyeroll. "At least morale is

high," Saitada told him.

Duncan sighed, and nodded to her. "Once the beacon is lit, you can join Loghain's lines. The tower is on the other side of the gorge from the king's camp, the way we came when we arrived. You'll need to cross the gorge and head through the gate and up to the tower entrance. From the top, you'll overlook the entire valley."

"Sounds easy enough," Brosca said.

"We will signal you when the time is right," Duncan said.

"Saitada knows what to look for." He nodded. "I must join the others. From here, you are on your own. Remember, you are Grey Wardens. I expect you to be worthy of that title."

"Duncan..." Alistair said. "May the Maker watch over you."

"May He watch over us all." He looked at Saitada once more, then walked off.

"Alright, people," Saitada said as she watched him go. "Let's go light a fire."

24. Chapter 24

The tower was in sight when Brehan suddenly staggered. "By the Dread Wolf..."

"Brehan?" Saitada asked.

"Darkspawn. At the tower." He narrowed his eyes in concentration, and then shook his head. "A lot of them."

Saitada drew her sword. "Maybe sending seven of us wasn't that bad an idea."

"Let's go," Alistair said, drawing his own blade.

#

Brosca stayed by Lenore, preventing any darkspawn from closing with the mage as she slung her spells. She sent a ball of fire at a ballista being aimed by a darkspawn, sending pieces of wood and hurlock flying.

To her left, Alistair and Brehan were moving forward as Cathiel fired arrows rapidly. She retrieved them as she moved. Saitada was to her right, using her shield as a weapon as much as her sword. She'd lost sight of Jerath, and had to hope the kid was still up and fighting.

She ducked as a bolt of lightning came at her. An emissary was aiming his staff for another blast. A foot of blade suddenly emerged from the emissary's mouth, and then Jerath pulled his sword free. Lenore wondered how the hell he'd managed to get up there, then shrugged and downed a lyrium potion before moving back into the fray.

Jerath was downing a rather well-armed hurlock as they made it to the door. Saitada looked at Brehan. "Numbers?"

"Dozens inside," Brehan replied. "Different kinds. A few feel like those casters."

"Shit," Brosca said.

Saitada nodded agreement. "We move as a team. Focus on getting to the beacon." She looked at Jerath. "You and I will take point. Brosca, stick with Lenore. Alistair, Brehan, you bring up the rear, keep Cathiel free to shoot."

"I'm low on..." Cathiel trailed off as Jerath offered her two quivers. "Never mind."

#

"Hold up," Brosca whispered.

Saitada held up a fist, and the group stopped. She raised an eyebrow at him.

He pointed. "Trap. Gimme a sec." He slid in and used his dagger to take care of the trip wire. It only took him a

moment. He nodded to Saitada, then moved back to guard Lenore.

Saitada gestured with the fist at the others, then held up a finger before signaling Jerath. The two of them circled around the barrels to the other side of the large group of darkspawn.

"Now!" Saitada yelled, and Lenore sent a fireball into the group. Brehan and Alistair charged in as Saitada and Jerath came from the other side. Brosca brought his mace down on a genlock that tried to close with the mage and archer as the two kept up a stream of fire.

A moment later, the spawn were down. Saitada looked at Brehan. "More above," he said. He concentrated. "Four groups, a few stragglers. And something weird."

"Something weird? You can't be more specific?" Alistair asked.

"I'll know what it is next time," Brehan replied.

"Keep moving," Saitada ordered.

#

Saitada held up a fist again, then looked from Cathiel's mabari to the mabari still in their cages. She looked at Jerath, then pointed at the cage lever. He nodded, and moved forward cautiously. The spawn started to sniff the air as they caught the sense of the warden. The elf abandoned stealth for

speed, and leaped from floor to barrel to the top of the cages, running lightly on the bars before jumping down and moving the lever.

The rest of the wardens closed as the mabari surged out of their cages and started tearing into the spawn. Cathiel gave a joyful laugh as her own mabari tore the throat out of a genlock.

Saitada saw Jerath get surrounded and was moving to his aid when the elf solved the problem by simply tumbling between the legs of the hurlock and rolling back to his feet before taking the hurlock's head from its shoulders. She shook her head and smiled before using her shield to parry a blow from another hurlock.

More darkspawn came out of the rooms ahead, and the dogs gleefully bounded alongside the wardens into the fray. "Good boy," Saitada told one as it pulled an emissary to the ground. Alistair looked to Brehan, who indicated the number of darkspawn in the next room, before looking to Saitada. She nodded, and he kicked the door open. Jerath moved in beside him, a sword in each hand, and put the blades to lethal effect. By the time Brosca and Lenore had caught up, the room was clear.

Cathiel turned to the dogs. "Guard," she ordered. The dogs immediately headed back down the corridor. She looked to Saitada. "If anything else comes in from that whole, they'll buy us time."

"Good thinking. Brehan, what's above us?"

"More of the same. And the weird thing still."

"Let me know as soon as you know what the weird thing is."

#

Jerath's hand pulled her back just as the ballista bolt went through the area she was standing. She cursed. "They've got the corridor covered."

"I can send a spell through."

"They'll skewer you while you take aim," Saitada said. She frowned, and then looked at Jerath. "Can you?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Go."

He stepped backwards and got a running start, kicking off the wall to enter the corridor from several feet off the ground. The two bolts both pierced the air a full foot too low to hit. He landed and rolled without stopping, coming back to his feet in a smooth motion. He used one ballista as a mounting horse, up and over to bring his blade down on the archer. The other genlock didn't even get its sword out before the elf ran him through.

Saitada and the others caught up. "Wow," Alistair said. "So that's why Duncan recruited you."

"Brehan?"

"Maybe a dozen left."

"And the weird thing?"

"Yes."

#

The ogre's teeth tore the spine out of one of the hapless soldiers. It turned as they entered. Blood dripped from its face.

"That's the weird thing?" Saitada asked.

"By the dread wolf..." Brehan whispered.

"I'll take that as a yes," Saitada replied. More darkspawn moved towards them. "Lenore, get the emissary."

The mage gave her a tired nod, and began to form the spell. The wardens moved forward.

Brehan moved with her, attempting to flank the ogre. She started to dart in, and the ogre simply backhanded Brehan, sending the elf flying into a stack of barrels. Saitada dodged a swing from the ogre's club, rolling away. She spared Brehan a glance and saw him moving.

Alistair charged from the ogre's other side. It spun, knocking the man off his feet with a glancing blow before raising its club

over its head. Then it let out a howl as Jerath landed on its back, stabbing with both swords. It spun, but the elf managed to stay put as the ogre flailed at him. Saitada took advantage of the opening to charge in and drive her blade into its gut. It knocked her aside, but its blow was too weak to do more than daze her. It started to step towards her, and Jerath drove one of his swords through the back of its neck. Alistair narrowly managed to roll out of its way as it fell forward. Jerath remained kneeling on its back for a moment before pulling his blades free.

Saitada touched her forehead. Her fingers came away red. "Get the fire going. Lenore, see to Brehan."

"Saitada, there are more coming from below," Brehan reported as Lenore worked the healing spell over him.

Brosca got the fire lit. "There."

"Alright, form up," Saitada ordered. "We've got to carve through these things if we want to go back up the hammer."

She heard Brehan let out a string of elvish before he shook his head. "We may need the hammer to back us up," he said.

#

Jerath saw Lenore take an arrow to the shoulder. Brosca moved to defend the mage. Alistair and Cathiel were back to back. She'd run out of arrows, and had a darkspawn blade in her hands. A blast from an emissary took both off their feet,

sending them flying into the wall. He heard Saitada curse as another ogre simply caught Brosca up and threw him at Brehan.

Instinct guided Jerath's sword as he moved through the field. Part of his mind counted. Ten. Eleven. A genlock got past Saitada's guard. Twelve. She tried to counter, and its mace rang against her helmet. The dwarf fell.

More streamed in from the door. He took a breath, and then let the rage take him.

#

He heard a beat of wings. Black blood dripped from both his blades. His side burned, sticky with blood from where he'd taken a glancing blow from a hurlock's blade.

"My my, what have we here?" He turned to see the old woman from the wilds. She stepped neatly into the tower from the balcony. "A bit more to you than meets the eye, hmmm?" She knelt briefly next to Alistair and felt for the man's pulse. "Alive."

He blinked at her, and then went to Saitada. She lay in a spreading pool of red, but she was still breathing. He tightened the strap to her breastplate, using the armor to stem the flow of blood.

"Come, lad," the woman said. "Bring him." She gestured at Alistair. "There is little enough time."

Jerath shook his head, trying to make sense of what was happening. The rage whispered in his mind, words too soft and low for him to understand. He looked down at Saitada. "What about the others?"

"They are unnecessary."

Jerath shook his head. He looked at her again. Something was off, wrong. "They are still alive."

"Not for much longer, I think. There is more red outside than in."

"You could heal them."

"We are pressed for time, boy. Bring the prince, and let's go."

"The?" Jerath glanced at Alistair, then shook his head again. "You..." He came forward, blocking her path to the balcony. "We aren't leaving without them." He said, holding his blades ready.

She cocked her head to one side appraisingly. "You would stand against me?" She smiled slowly. "Do you know what I am, lad?"

He met her eyes. Something swirled behind them. "Powerful," Jerath responded. He took a breath. "And pressed for time."

She smiled lazily, and looked down at the wounded wardens. "This is quite the effort you wish me to put forth. Five wardens. Are you certain you wish to be in my debt, boy?"

"We wouldn't be having this conversation at all if you didn't need me for something," Jerath replied. "Whatever it is you have in mind..." He looked at the others before meeting her eyes. "I can't do it alone."

"You are a clever one." She nodded to herself, pleased. "Five favors. And you will not tell them how they were rescued from the tower, nor of the bargain between us." She moved among the wardens quickly, touching each. "They will live long enough for me to tend them back at my hut." She gave him a sharp look. "You did not tell me your name, earlier."

"I am Jerath, ma'am."

"Ma'am?" She laughed. "He challenges me, then becomes polite once more. Do you know who I am, Jerath?"

"Brehan called you Asha'bellonar." Something in the back of his mind whispered. "The woman of many years."

"Some call me that. You may call me Flemeth." She rose from Lenore's side. "Gather them. And I will need that as well," she said, gesturing lazily at a banner.

Jerath was already moving, gathering the banner. He could feel darkspawn approaching. At Flemeth's direction, he laid the wardens onto the banner. He set Griffon next to Cathiel, and Flemeth gave him an amused look. "How do you..." he started to ask.

Flemeth leaned her head back and rolled it from side to side

before she let the dragon form take her. She grabbed the ends of the banner in each of her claws, and then leaned her head down to where Jerath stood. Without hesitation, he climbed onto her neck and settled himself securely. With a beat of her wings, she took flight.

#

He looked down over the carnage of the battle. The anvil had been destroyed. The hammer was absent the field. Fire spread where the laborer's tents had been, and even this high in the air he could hear the screams of the dying. Even the rage felt weary at the sight. A minute later, they were clear of the scene. The dragon backwinged as she approached the hut, and he leaped down from her neck, grunting as he landed. He moved to the banner, helping her set the wardens down gently.

Morrigan emerged from the hut. She raised an eyebrow. "You were successful, I see."

Flemeth returned to her human form and laughed before calling out instructions. "They are wounded girl, and will need tending. See to those," she said, gesturing at the less damaged wardens. "You," she said to Jerath, "bring the dwarf and the other elf into the hut."

Jerath nodded, and obeyed. Flemeth put both hands on Brehan's head, and Jerath saw her hands and eyes glow briefly as the elf's breathing steadied. Flemeth then came to stand next to Saitada, and shook her head. "The armor is all

that is holding her together," she said. "I will stabilize her while you remove it," she directed, handing him a knife. Her hands glowed briefly.

He kept his hands where she directed as she finished closing Saitada's wounds. "She'll live?" he asked.

Flemeth reached out and caught his chin in a hand still wet with Saitada's blood, turning him to look at her. He forced himself not to pull back as she examined him. "You took wounds?" she said, without releasing him.

"Scratches," he replied. "Some bruises."

She nodded, but did not release him. "As I said, you will not tell them how they were retrieved from the tower, nor will you tell anyone of the bargain between us."

"What would you have me tell them?" he asked.

"I'm sure a clever boy like you will think of something," she smiled. She turned her head to one side. "I would have expected you to be one of the people..." she said softly, then released him.

He stepped back from her, wiping away the mark she'd left on his chin. "What favors do you ask of me?"

She laughed. "In due time, my boy. In due time."

25. Chapter 25

Saitada opened her eyes. Above her she saw wooden beams, hanging with herbs. She blinked, and sat up.

"Ah, your eyes finally open. Mother shall be pleased," Morrigan said, coming over to the bed.

"What happened to the darkspawn?" Saitada asked. The last thing she remembered as a genlock charging at her.

"You were injured, and then Mother rescued you. Do you not remember?"

"Wait..." She furrowed her brow. This was no healer tent. "What happened to the army? To the king?"

"The man who as to respond to your signal quit the field. The darkspawn won your battle. Those he abandoned were massacred. Some of your friends... are not taking it well."

Her blood went cold. "What happened to the Grey Wardens? And the king? And...?" She couldn't bring herself to say his name.

From the other side of the room she heard Jerath's voice. "They are gone, Saitada." She turned to look at him, and he continued, "all of them." There was sympathy in his eyes.

"All?" Her voice was small.

"Your friends are outside by the fire. Mother asked to see you when you awoke."

Jerath looked up at the witch. "Thank you for your help, Morrigan."

"I... you are welcome, though Mother did most of the work. I am no healer. Mother is outside when you are ready. I will stay and make something to eat." She walked off to another part of the hut.

Jerath stood, and came over to sit on the edge of the bed. Saitada looked up at him. "How did she manage to rescue us, exactly?"

He looked in the direction the swamp witch had gone. "I am still working on grasping that one."

"Who else survived?"

"All of us that were in the tower. Even managed to get Griffon out. He's heavy." Jerath hung his head a moment, then sighed. "I got hit in the head. It's all still a bit blurry. Some stragglers and a few of the ones on the outskirts of the battle may have gotten away. The valley is..." His voice became bleak. "Not a pretty sight."

"Then Duncan may have..." She searched his face for any sign of hope.

"He's gone, Saitada. He would not leave the king's side."

Saitada closed her eyes for several moments, then took a deep breath and forced the tears away. "What shape are the others in?"

"Brehan was hurt badly, but he woke up an hour ago and is moving around. Everyone else was moving at breakfast time." He twitched a shoulder. "Brehan's armor is a loss, and his axe is still somewhere in the tower. We had to cut your armor off you. Brosca lost all his knives, but somehow managed to hang onto his mace. Morrigan gave Lenore a new staff. Alistair lost his blade, but has the one we took out of Brosca. I lost my short sword, but acquired a darkspawn axe at some point."

She nodded. "Resupplying may need to be our first priority now. Is there...?"

He handed her a dress that had been cut down to her side, then stood and faced the wall so she could dress. It fit awkwardly, but made her decent. "Alright, let's go see what the Witch of the Wild wants with us."

#

Alistair scrambled to his feet as soon as she exited the hut. Flemeth turned towards him. "See? Here are your fellow Grey Wardens. You worry too much, young man."

"You... you're alive!" His eyes met hers. "I thought you were dead for sure."

"I'm fine." She saw her grief reflected in his eyes. "I appreciate your concern."

"This doesn't seem real. If it weren't for Morrigan's mother, we'd be dead on top of that tower." He turned towards her.

She scoffed at him. "Do not talk about me as if I am not present, lad."

"I didn't mean..." He shook his head. "But what do we call you? You never told us your name."

"Names are pretty, but useless. The Chasind folk call me Flemeth. I suppose it will do."

"The Flemeth from the legends? Daveth was right- you're a Witch of the Wilds, aren't you?"

"And what does that mean? I know a bit of magic, and it has served you all well, has it not?"

"I suppose we should thank you," Lenore said, rising from where she'd been staring listlessly into the fire.

"If you know what is good for you, I suppose you should!" Flemeth folded her arms.

Saitada looked around at her companions. They looked battered, and worn, but alive. "We can't be safe here. Where are all the darkspawn?"

Flemeth shrugged carelessly. "The largest part of the horde

has moved on. We are safe enough for now. She smiled. "Old Flemeth knows a thing or two about hiding. The longer you are here, the less that is true, however. These things will notice you eventually."

"We need to stop this Blight somehow." Jerath's voice was quiet, but resolute.

Alistair shook his head angrily. "We need to bring Loghain to judgment! Why would he do this?"

"Now that is a good question." Flemeth tapped her bottom lip thoughtfully. "Men's hearts hold shadows darker than any tainted creature. Perhaps he believes the Blight is an army he can outmaneuver. Perhaps he does not see that the evil behind it is the true threat."

"The archdemon," Alistair said.

Lenore picked up her staff. "We should contact the rest of the Grey Wardens."

"Cailan already summoned them," Alistair said. "They'll come if they can." He ran a hand through his hair. "But I expect Loghain has already taken steps to stop them. We must assume they won't arrive in time."

"What is this archdemon, exactly?" Brosca asked, folding his arms.

Flemeth gave them a solemn look. "It is said that, long ago,

the Maker sent the Old Gods of the ancient Tevinter Imperium to slumber in prisons deep beneath the surface. An archdemon is an Old God awakened and tainted by darkspawn. Believe that or not, history says it's a fearsome and immortal thing. And only fools ignore history."

"What would the teyrn hope to gain by betraying the king?" Brehan asked.

"The throne? He's the queen's father." Alistair ran his hand over the hilt of his sword. "Still, I can't see how he'll get away with murder."

"You speak as if he would be the first king to gain his throne that way." Flemeth waved a hand at him. "Grow up, boy!"

Alistair turned towards her, his voice angry. "If Arl Eamon knew what he did, he would never stand for it! The Landsmeet would never stand for it! There would be civil war!"

"Arl Eamon?" Cathiel rose to stand next to Alistair. "The arl of Redcliffe?"

Alistair looked back at her thoughtfully. "I suppose..." Arl Eamon wasn't at Ostagar; he still has all his men. And he was Cailan's uncle. I know him. He's a good man.

"What about those treaties Flemeth gave us?" Jerath's voice held a note of irritation.

Flemeth gave him a sidelong look, and smirked. "See? There

is a smart lad."

"Of course!" Alistair smacked himself in the forehead. "The treaties! Grey Wardens can demand aid from dwarves, elves, mages, and other places! They're obligated to help us during a Blight!"

"I may be old, but dwarves, elves, mages, this Arl Eamon, and who knows what else... this sounds like an army to me."

"Why not?" Saitada injected bravado into her voice, and lifted her chin challengingly as she looked at her companions. "Isn't that what Grey Wardens do?"

"So you are set, then? Ready to be Grey Wardens?"

"Yes. Thank you for everything, Flemeth."

"No, no, thank you." She waved her hands dismissively. "You are the Grey Wardens here, not I. Now..." An odd smile lit her face. "Before you go, there is yet one more thing I can offer you."

#

Morrigan emerged from the hut. "The stew is bubbling, Mother dear. Shall we have guests for the eve, or none?"

"The Grey Wardens are leaving shortly, girl. And you will be joining them."

"Such a shame," Morrigan started to drawl. She blinked.

"What?"

"You heard me, girl. The last time I looked, you had ears!"
Flemeth threw back her head and laughed.

Saitada looked at the dumbstruck young witch. "Thank you, but if Morrigan doesn't wish to join us..."

Flemeth overrode the objection with a careless gesture. "Her magic will be useful. Even better, she knows the Wilds and how to get past the hordes."

"Have I no say in this?"

"You have been itching to get out of the Wilds for years. Here is your chance. As for you, Wardens, consider this repayment for your lives."

Saitada gritted her teeth, then nodded. "Very well, we'll take her with us."

Alistair shook his head. "Not to... look a gift horse in the mouth, but won't this add to our problems? Out of the Wilds, she's an apostate."

Flemeth arched an eyebrow at him. "If you do not wish help from us illegal mages, young man, perhaps I should have left you on that tower."

Alistair withered a bit under her gaze. "Point taken."

"Mother... this is not how I wanted this. I am not even ready -"

"You must be ready. Alone, these people must unite Ferelden against the darkspawn. They need you, Morrigan. Without you, they will surely fail, and all will perish under the Blight. Even I."

"I... understand."

"And you, Wardens?" Flemeth looked at Saitada. "Do you understand?" Her eyes went to where Jerath was standing next to the dwarven woman. "I give you that which I value above all in this world. I do this because you must succeed."

"I understand," Saitada said.

"Allow me to get my things, if you please."

#

Morrigan re-emerged from the hut carrying two small packs. She threw one at Jerath, and he caught it easily before moving the strap to his shoulder. "I am at your disposal, Grey Wardens. I suggest a village north of the Wilds as our first destination. 'Tis not far, and you will find much you need there." She twisted the staff in her hands and gave her mother an annoyed look. "Or, if you prefer, I shall simply be your silent guide. The choice is yours."

"I think we should just get underway," Saitada said.

"Farewell, Mother. Do not forget the stew on the fire. I would hate to return to a burned-down hut."

"Bah." Flemeth waved a hand at her. "'Tis far more likely you will return to see this entire area, along with my hut, swallowed up by the Blight."

"I... all I meant was..."

Flemeth smiled. "Yes, I know. Do try to have fun, dear."

Saitada gave the group a cursory once over, then nodded. "Let's head to this village of yours then, Morrigan."

#

Lenore gave Saitada a cursory once-over. "Well, I suppose Flemeth does know her healing."

Saitada smiled, "I take it I was in rough shape?"

Lenore nodded. "If we'd been limited to my healing skills, you'd be dead now. They just kept coming."

Saitada thought back to the fight. "I lost sight of Alistair and Cathiel when the emissary started casting."

"I caught an arrow in the chest when they first started coming. Brozca tried to keep any from getting closer to me, but they overwhelmed him. I saw you take the hit from a genlock. It was about to finish you off, but Jerath cut it down." Lenore frowned briefly. In the haze, it had almost seemed... She shrugged. "Then something hit me and I passed out. Woke up in Flemeth's hut, and she had me finish tending to Brehan." She looked Saitada over again. "Jerath had to cut your armor

off before she could tend to you."

"He mentioned that. Did he say how she rescued us?"

"He said he got hit in the head and the last few seconds of the fight were a bit of a blur. He did say... he said she tried to get to Duncan first, but it was too late."

Saitada closed her eyes a moment, then nodded. "Will you start making a list of supplies we are going to need?"

"Of course," Lenore replied.

#

Brehan cast his senses around. "Nothing within my range. Perhaps we could risk a fire?"

"Could do with some warm," Brosca said. He gave Lenore a worried look. The mage was almost dragging. "And some rest."

"Keep the fire small," Saitada said.

Alistair slumped against a tree, then let himself slide to the ground. Cathiel sat next to him, her own face bleak. Brehan knelt and began building the fire.

Morrigan lit it with a gesture from her staff as soon as he'd finished gathering the wood. "I will get water," she said as she disappeared into the forest.

Jerath removed the pack from his shoulder and offered it to Brehan. Brehan took it, and removed a small pot from within. He went through the rest of the pack, and took out some dried herbs and jerky, and set about making a stew.

"I'll take first watch," Saitada said.

Jerath shook his head at her. "You are still healing. I've got it."

"You sure?"

He nodded. "I'll wake someone when I need sleep." He looked over at where Lenore had her head on Brosca's shoulder.

"Not Lenore."

"Good. You'd make a terrible frog," Brehan said. When Morrigan returned, he added the water to the pot, and set the stew to heat. He stretched, looking around at the bleak faces of his companions.

Silence reigned as they ate communally from the pot, sharing the two spoons that were in the pack. Cathiel had to elbow Alistair to get him to eat at all, and Brehan noted Jerath did the same for Saitada. He rinsed the empty pot, and put it back in the pack. His stomach still felt empty.

He stood, staring into the fire. His mind drifted back to his last hour with his clan.

#

Saitada looked up as the Dalish man began to sing. She didn't

have to know the words to understand their meaning as the dirge flowed around her. Brehan's voice was rich as he sang the eulogy, his eyes half closed as he looked into the fire. She saw tears falling from the eyes of both Cathiel and Alistair as the two sat together, lost in grief. Brosca put an arm around Lenore as the mage leaned against him.

She closed her own eyes, and lost herself in Brehan's voice.

#

The journey out of the Wilds was quiet. At night they scarcely dared a fire, relying instead on the dried foodstuffs that Flemeth has provided them. Brehan managed to scrounge a little, but Saitada made him stay close to camp. Even with the range of the elf's senses, there were times the darkspawn nearly were upon them. Twice they had to fight their way clear of a small band, then flee before larger numbers came down upon them.

They ate on the move. None slept well, and often they were underway again before the sun had fully risen, allowing them to make good time out of the wilds with the help of their guide. In four days, they reached Lothering...

26. Chapter 26

Saitada actually growled when she saw the men lounging about on the bridge. For a moment, she considered telling Morrigan to find another way into the town, then one of the men looked up and spotted them. "Wake up, gentlemen! More travelers to attend to." He cocked his head at her. "Led by a dwarf, oddly enough."

Another of the bandits looked them over, eyes narrowing. "Err... they don't look much like them others, you know. Uh... maybe we should just let these ones pass..."

"Nonsense!" the first man said cheerfully. "Greetings, travelers!"

"Highwaymen," Alistair said. He put a hand on his sword. "Preying on those fleeing the darkspawn, I suppose."

"They are fools to get in our way. I say teach them a lesson." Morrigan tightened her grip on her staff.

"Now is that any way to greet someone?" The leader of the bandits drew himself up as though he were actually affronted. "Tsk, tsk, tsk. A simple ten silvers and you're free to move on."

Saitada rubbed her forehead tiredly. "You should listen to your friend. We're not refugees."

"What did I tell you? No wagons, and this one looks armed."

"The toll applies to everyone, Hanric. That's why it's a toll, and not, say, a refugee tax."

"Oh, right. Even if you're no refugee, you still gotta pay."

"Forget it." Saitada looked up at them calmly. "I'm not paying."

"Well I can't say I'm pleased to hear that. We have rules, you know."

" get to ransack your corpse, then. Those are the rules."

"Do you really want to fight Grey Wardens?" Saitada looked up at where Jerath was standing next to her, and gave him a small nod.

"Did she say they are Grey Wardens? Them ones killed the king!" Saitada blinked at the bandit's words.

"Traitors to Ferelden, I hear. Teyrn Loghain put quite a bounty on any who are found. What do you say, gents? With that kind of bounty, we can retire! Let's be heroes to the kingdom!"

The bandit leader drew his blade, and Jerath stepped in front of Saitada, parrying it before kicking the bandit in the stomach and sending him backwards. Alistair and Brosca closed in on either side of Jerath as the rest of the bandits joined the fray.

Morrigan gave a delighted laugh as she used her magic to start hurling rocks at the bandits.

"All right! We surrender! We-we-we're just trying to get by, before the darkspawn get us all." The bandit leader held up his hands after Jerath almost casually disarmed him.

"You picked the wrong target," Saitada said.

"Yes! Yes! Of... of course! We should've been more careful. I'm sorry." The bandit gave her a wan smile.

"This shoddy operation is pathetic." Brosca actually sounded insulted. "I could do better."

"Um... right. I guess so." The bandit leader gave Brosca a meek look. "I'm sorry?" he offered hopefully.

Brosca smirked at him in response. "Hand over everything you've stolen." Saitada turned to Brosca and raised an eyebrow. He gave her a cheeky grin, and she just shook her head.

"Yes! Yes, of course. The coins we collected are right here... just over a hundred silvers. The rest is in the chests we brought! I swear."

Saitada sighed. This game had gone on long enough. "We are turning you in to the authorities."

"There aren't any! Just the Templars, and they'll execute me!" The bandit leader started shaking his head.

"They'll do what they must. Come with us," Saitada said.

"I'm not going down without a fight." He went for his sword, and Jerath almost casually ran him through. The bandit leader gave Jerath a startled look, then fell to the ground and went still.

"Huh," Brosca said.

"What?" Saitada said, turning to look at him.

"He went down without a fight."

Saitada shook her head as Lenore laughed. Jerath cleaned the edge of his blade and shrugged. "Did you really just shake down the highway robbers?" Lenore asked Brosca.

"Figured we could use the coin," Brosca said. "Let's see if they got any good shit." He nodded at the crates and barrels the bandits had been guarding.

#

They entered Lothing somewhat better equipped. Saitada looked down over the filthy, beraggled city. Refugee tents were everywhere, and the wind brought the smell of unwashed bodies and dog. Alistair stopped at a landing on the staircase. "Well there it is. Lothing. Pretty as a painting."

Morrigan gave him a look. "Ah. So you have finally decided to rejoin us, have you? Falling on your blade in grief seemed like too much trouble, I take it?"

"Is my being upset so hard to understand? Have you never lost someone important to you? Just what would you do if your mother died?"

"Before or after I stopped laughing?"

"Right. Very creepy. Forget I asked."

Cathiel stepped between them. "Leave him alone, Morrigan."

"But how can I? He is right there, speaking, eyes wide like those of a brainless calf."

"Oh, I get it. This is the part where we're shocked to discover how you've never had a friend your entire life."

"I can be friendly when I desire to. Alas, desiring to be more intelligent does not make it so."

Saitada struck her heel against the stone of the steps and both of them turned to look at her. They subsided at her glare.

"Anyway..." Alistair looked back over the village before turning to her. "I thought we should talk about where we intend to go, first."

"I need to look for Fergus. He might still be alive."

"He was out scouting the Wilds, wasn't he?" Alistair asked Cathiel. "That's what the king said." She nodded.

Morrigan shrugged. "Then attempting to look for him there

would be foolish. He is either dead or he managed to flee to the north."

"Very sensitive," Alistair shot Morrigan a glare as Cathiel paled slightly.

"I am simply saying that it is foolish to mount a rescue when you have no notion where this man is and the Wilds are overrun with darkspawn. You will either find him somewhere outside the Wilds with other survivors, or..." She shrugged. "Not at all."

Cathiel rounded on her. "That doesn't mean I shouldn't look for him!"

"That's exactly what it means." Morrigan gave her a haughty look. "You wish to do this brother of yours a service? Avenge him. The time to look for survivors will come later."

Alistair pulled Cathiel away. "I think what Flemeth suggested is the best idea. These treaties... have you looked at them?"

"Yes, I have," Saitada said, touching the scroll case that was tucked safely into her belt pouch.

"There are three main groups that we have treaties for: the Dalish elves, the dwarves of Orzammar, and the Circle of Magi. I also still think that Arl Eamon is our best bet for help. We might even want to go to him first." He shrugged at Saitada.

"Why are you leaving it up to her?" Cathiel asked.

"Well, I don't know where we should go. I'll do whatever you decide." Alistair ran a hand through his hair helplessly.

"Now that is unsurprising." Morrigan folded her arms and smirked at him.

"Arl Eamon is a good man, but I don't know for sure he's where we should go. I'm not going to fight about it." He shook his head.

Saitada thought a moment. "Is there a way to contact the Grey Wardens?"

"Short of leaving Ferelden to seek them out, the only place to send word to would be Weisshaupt Fortress, and that's thousands of miles away."

Saitada nodded. "I'll figure it out as we go."

Cathiel blinked. "You'll figure it out? Who put you in charge?"

"Alistair just did," Brosca said.

"Now wait just a..."

Saitada held up a hand to forestall the argument. "We will resupply in Lothering before we head on to Redcliffe. After that, we can discuss our next destination."

Cathiel glared at her, Alistair by her side. Lenore looked from

Cathiel to Saitada, face confused. Brosca folded his arms as he shifted to stand next to Saitada. Brehan met Lenore's eyes, and the mage gave a helpless sort of shrug in response. He sighed, and shook his head uncertainly. Morrigan turned away, focusing her attention on Lothering as though she didn't care how the confrontation worked out.

"We are following Saitada," Jerath's voice was quiet, but it held a note of finality. He started for the stairs.

"Fine." Cathiel waved a dismissive hand. "I agree with her plan anyway."

#

Lenore fell into step next to Brosca. She kept her voice low, pitched so as not to carry. "So, you are okay with Saitada being the new commander?"

"Of course."

"Shouldn't we put it to a vote or something?"

"Bah, waste of time. I'd just have to smack around anybody that didn't vote for her."

She mussed his hair teasingly. "Got a bit of a crush, do you?"

"What?" He looked up at her and shook his head. "No..." ain't that. I'm casteless. In Orzammar, that's about two rungs below 'thing I scraped off my boot last night'. But from the start..." His voice became sad. "Duncan always treated me

like I was a person. Found out from him just how many strings Saitada pulled on to help me get into the Wardens. Even made sure I got this mace, one her own ancestor wielded. Since it can't be Duncan leading us no more, it's gonna be Saitada."

"I see."

He shrugged. "Besides, she was a military commander in Orzammar. Who better?"

"Cathiel?" Lenore asked, looking back over her shoulder at the now sullen woman.

"Cathiel didn't want to be a warden though. Sure don't think she actually wants to lead us, she's just used to giving orders."

"A fair point, I suppose." Her eyes went to the elf currently taking point. "What about Jerath?"

Brosca gave the kid a considering look. "He's the meanest thing I've ever seen with a blade, but I'm surprised his voice ain't still cracking. Maybe a few years from now. I mean, vote if you want, but let's face facts. Alistair doesn't want the job, and neither do I. You're smarter than a shaper, but you haven't been out in the world all that long. And Brehan..." He glanced at the Dalish man. "Heh, let's fight one war at a time. Best for the job is Saitada. Not sure why it's even up for discussion."

"I'm still coming to terms with the entire situation. It's been... you know, back in the tower, I used to think about how much I wanted to experience the world. How interesting it would be to just get out and have an adventure."

"And?"

"If it gets any more interesting I'm going to go crawl in a hole somewhere and pull it in after me."

Brosca laughed.

#

Saitada watched Brosca dicker with the rude merchant. She glanced over, then walked to stand next to Jerath. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"For what?"

"Backing me up there."

"If we were fortifying a castle, I'd have backed Cathiel. We are hunting Darkspawn. You know them best. Likely as well as Duncan did."

She shook her head and smiled. "Very pragmatic of you. Still, I'm surprised on some level. Duncan said he conscripted you."

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "I believe he conscripted Brosca and Lenore as well."

"Only technically. They joined willingly enough, the conscription only smoothed the process for others."

"It is not the path I would have chosen." He looked down at her. "But it is not a path I am unwilling to follow. If that changes, I will let you know."

She looked him over. "I'd say you were a strange man, but then again, you are the first elf I ever met. Perhaps you are perfectly normal."

One corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "Normal elves don't carry swords."

"Brehan does."

"He is Dalish. We have as much in common as you and Lenore."

"I have much to learn about your people, it seems."

"As do I." Jerath turned to face her. "He picked you."

"Hmm?"

"Duncan. You are who he would have designated. He was going to train you to take his place one day. He did not give me reason to doubt his judgment in the matter." He gave her a small bow. "Nor have you."

"Thank you, Jerath. That... that means a lot to me."

She looked away from him, and noted that Brosca had apparently finished bargaining. The merchant looked very unhappy. Hopefully, that meant Brosca had managed some sort of deal.

#

Brehan knew the men were going to be trouble the moment he set eyes on them. The man in fancy armor looked at them when they entered, and gave a slow, satisfied smile. A dozen men in armor arrayed around him. "Well, look what we have here, men. I think we've just been blessed."

"Uh-oh." Alistair nudged Saitada. "Loghain's men. This can't be good."

One of the soldiers looked around the inn, then back at Saitada. "Didn't we spend all morning asking about a dwarf by this very description? And everybody said they hadn't seen one?"

The commander smirked. "It seems we were lied to."

Brehan laid a hand on his sword as a young woman in pale robes stepped out of the crowd. Her accent was odd to his ears. "Gentlemen, surely there is no need for trouble. These are no doubt simply more poor souls seeking refuge."

"They're more than that. Now stay out of our way, Sister. You protect these traitors, you'll get the same as them." The commander gave her a threatening look.

Brehan gestured for her to step back. "We don't need your help, miss. Please stand back."

"You don't need my protection," she said, looking over him and the rest of the group. "But these men will blindly follow their master's command even unto death."

"I am not the blind one! I served at Ostagar, where the teyrn saved us from the Grey Wardens treachery! I serve him gladly! Enough talk. Take the wardens into custody. Kill the sister and anyone else that gets in your way."

"Right! Let's make this quick." The rest of the soldiers started to stand up.

Saitada sighed. "Jerath?"

The commander hadn't even finished drawing his sword before Jerath's blade was at his throat. Brehan drew his own sword as next to him Cathiel aimed her arrow at the soldier that had spoken. The commander swallowed. Saitada didn't bother to move, her expression utterly contemptuous.

The commander swallowed, then glanced at Jerath. Brehan's lips twitched as he noted that Jerath just looked bored by the whole affair. The commander switched his gaze to Saitada. "All right, you've won! We surrender!"

"Good," the woman in the sunburst robes said. "They've learned their lesson and we can all stop fighting, now."

Saitada squared her shoulders. "The Grey Wardens didn't betray King Cailan. Loghain did."

"I was there! The teyrn pulled us out of a trap!"

Anger filled Saitada's voice. "The teyrn left the king to die!"

"The Wardens led the king to his death! The teyrn could do nothing!" The commander's voice cut off as Jerath lifted his blade slightly.

"Want him dead?" Jerath asked Saitada.

"No." She narrowed her eyes at the soldier. "Take a message to Loghain."

"W-what do you want to tell him?"

"The Grey Wardens know what really happened."

"I'll tell him. Right away. Now. Thank you!" Jerath lowered the blade, and the men started to flee.

Brehan watched the soldiers practically scamper out of the door. Jerath sheathed his blade as the woman in chantry robes approached them. "I apologize for interfering, but I couldn't just sit by and not help."

"I appreciate what you tried to do," Saitada said.

"I am glad you found it in your heart to offer those men mercy." Her smile was bright and warm. "Let me introduce

myself. I am Leliana, one of the lay sisters of the chantry here in Lothering. Or I was."

"What does that mean?" Brehan asked.

"I joined the Chantry to live a life of religious contemplation, but I am no priest, not even an initiate."

"I am Brehan. A pleasure." He glances around, uncertain if he should introduce the others. Brosca was conversing with a merchant, trying to get them some more supplies. Cathiel was talking to someone she apparently knew. Jerath and Morrigan had moved to the door, apparently watching to make sure the soldiers did not return. Saitada seemed inclined to let him talk, so he introduced her, Alistair, and Lenore.

"They said you were a Grey Warden. I'm surprised you're an elf, but elves must want the Blight defeated as much as humans, no? I know after what happened, you'll need all the help you can get." Her voice became matter of fact. "That's why I'm coming along."

"Er..." Brehan glanced at Saitada.

"I'm sorry, Sister, but you are very mistaken," Saitada said.

"Ah, I thought you might say that, but you see, the Maker wants me to join you."

"Right..." Saitada rubbed her forehead. "I believe this is where I back away slowly."

"I-I know that sounds... absolutely insane -" She turned back to Brehan and gave him a beseeching look. "But it's true! I had a dream... a vision."

"More crazy?" Alistair muttered. "I thought we were full up."

"Look at the people here. They are lost in their despair, and this darkness, this chaos... will spread. The Maker doesn't want this. What you do, what you are meant to do, is the Maker's work. Let me help!"

"We need more than prayers, I'm afraid," Saitada said.

Brehan glanced at the dwarf. "We should not turn away help when it is offered."

From the door, Morrigan shot him a look. "Perhaps your skull was cracked worse than Mother thought."

"Thank you!" Leliana put a hand on his arm as she practically gushed with joy. "I appreciate being given this chance. I will not let you down."

Saitada was looking at him like he was insane. He sighed. She might have a point.

#

Saitada gave Brehan a look that combined amusement and annoyance. Brehan shrugged. "Cathiel may know Highever, but a commoner would know more about the people than a mage or noble, right? She could help."

"We don't know who we can trust." If she didn't know any better, she'd think the Dalish man was actually blushing. "Keep an eye on her. She's your responsibility." Saitada glanced over at the door. "Jerath, Morrigan, keep watch, make sure there are no more such surprises. The rest of us will see about getting some supplies and finding out what news we can."

Jerath nodded to her, then jerked his head at Morrigan. The witch followed him out of the inn. Brosca was bartering with a merchant, and Saitada's ears twitched slightly at the mention of poisons. It appeared though that their options were limited. Between them, they had less than three royals, and that included the money Brosca had extracted from the bandits and what they'd managed to get for the bandit's gear. Without resources, they were lost in the black.

The bounty on their heads limited their options still further. She'd thought to turn to the local nobility for supplies, but with Loghain's accusations, that was going to be dangerous at best. Hopefully, Alistair was right about them being able to count on Arl Eamon. If he turned them away... She sighed to herself. If he turned them away, they might have little choice but to head for the border and find the Orlesian wardens.

#

Jerath and Morrigan left the inn and headed back over the bridge. He could see the soldiers riding away. They would likely be back with reinforcements before too long, but it already looked as though staying in Lothering was not an

option.

The walls had shifted again, and yet, they seemed stronger somehow. Something had changed there in the tower. Or maybe in the hut. In the fight with the bandits, it hadn't clawed at him. It had just... been there. His thoughts went back to the witch. Flemeth had been more amused than surprised. But then, he'd sensed something in her as well. He glanced over at Morrigan.

She caught his eye. "What do you want?"

"I'd like to ask you something."

"If you must."

He considered a moment, and decided to start with a smaller question. "Did you grow up in the Korcari Wilds?"

"Why do you ask me such questions? I do not probe you for pointless information, do I?" She gave him an irritated look.

"I'm curious. What's wrong with that?" He twitched a shoulder. If she didn't want to talk, that was fine by him.

She smirked. "Any number of cats could inform you of the answer to that question. But have it your way. What was it you asked? If I grew up in the Wilds? A curious question. Where else would you picture me? For many years it was simply Flemeth and I. The Wilds and its creatures were more real to me than Flemeth's tales of the world of man. In time, I

grew curious. I left the Wilds to explore what lay beyond. Never for long. Brief forays into a civilized wilderness."

"And you remained unnoticed?"

"For the most part. Flemeth taught me well. For all that I had been taught, however, the truth of the civilized lands proved to be... overwhelming. I was unfamiliar with so much. So confident and bold was I, yet there was much that Flemeth could never have prepared me for."

"Very daring." He nodded to her. "That sounds like you."

Her laugh was surprisingly warm. "Equal parts daring and foolhardy, perhaps. Only once was I accused of being a Witch of the Wilds, and that by a Chasind who happened to be traveling with a merchant caravan. He pointed and gasped and began shouting in his strange language, and most assumed he was casting some curse upon me. I acted the terrified girl, and naturally he was arrested."

He raised an eyebrow. "That was quick thinking."

She smiled proudly. "Men are always willing to believe two things about a woman: one, that she is weak, and two, that she finds him attractive. I played the weakling and batted my eyelashes at the captain of the guard. Child's play. The point being that I was able to move through human lands fairly easily. Whatever humans think a Witch of the Wilds looks like, 'tis not I. Not that I did not have trouble. There are things about human society which have always puzzled me. Such as

the touching -?" She looked at him. "Why all the touching for a simply greeting?"

"Touching?" He nodded. He didn't care much for being touched either. "Like a handshake?"

"To begin with, yes. What is the point of touching my hand? I find it an offensive intrusion. There were many nuances that Flemeth could never tell me of. When to look in another's eyes, how to eat at a table, how to bargain without offending... none of these things I knew. I still do not understand it all, truth be told. But, then, I gave up long ago any hope of doing so. When I returned to the Wilds last, I sword to Flemeth that I had no intention of leaving again."

"Yet here you are."

"Yes." She sighed. "Here I am."

He stood for several minutes, watching the horizon. The smarter refugees were already on the move, heading north or west. Those who managed to keep their goods or coin secure would undoubtedly be finding ships. Ostagar was going to cost Ferelden. "It's about dominance."

"Excuse me?" She actually jumped a bit, startled that he'd spoken.

"The handshake. It's about strength and power. Let me see your hand a moment." She offered it, and he took it in his, adjusting his grip to match his words. "If I shake your hand

like this, you would know I was weak, perhaps easily intimidated. I would be acknowledging that I believe you to be the stronger of us. But if I shook your hand this way, I would be instead trying to intimidate you, or at least to impress you with my strength. If I held your hand longer than you would like, it would be a matter of control. I'd be demonstrating that I thought I had the right to your hand, and that I cared not for your feelings on the matter. And that I believed you powerless to stop me and wanted you to know that. Also, my holding on to your hand limits your options to defend yourself. I have your dominant hand in my control, leaving you vulnerable to my allies." He let go of her hand. "It became part of the social niceties to disguise the issue, and lack of playing any of these games can show someone has more friendly intentions or holds respect for you, or at least views you as their equal."

"I see."

He shrugged. "Nobles like to crush fingers as a show of dominance. They know that even if you are the stronger, their position gives them enough power that you dare not retaliate, and so the handshake is a way to force you to submit."

Morrigan examined her hand for a moment. "Thank you. That explanation does clarify matters indeed." She smiled at him. "Would that all would speak so frankly on the matter. Well, let's get on with it before the ground opens up and swallows us, yes?"

He nodded, and they began to walk through the village.

#

Cathiel and Alistair found their way to the chantry. Alistair gestured for Cathiel to follow him as he walked towards a man in armor. The man looked up as they approached. "Who...? I beg your pardon. I did not see you approach."

"Ser Donall...?" Alistair asked. "Is that you?"

"Alistair?" The man smiled broadly, then clapped Alistair on the shoulders. "By the Maker, how are you? I was certain you were dead!"

"Not yet." Alistair's voice was bitter. No thanks to Teryn Loghain. May I introduce my fellow Grey Warden? We are the last in Ferelden, as far as I know."

"Terrible news, indeed." He gave Cathiel a small bow. "Pleased to meet you, my lady. Might I know your name?"

"I am Cathiel Cousland. It is a pleasure to meet you."

His eyes widened at her name, and he looked over his shoulder before lowering his voice. "I trust you are staying discreet? With the bounty placed on your heads?"

Alistair's face revealed his outrage, but he kept his voice low. "We've heard Loghain's accusations. But he's the one who betrayed the king."

Ser Donall shook his head and sighed. "If Arl Eamon were well, he'd set Loghain straight soon enough."

Worry flooded into Alistair's face. "If he were well? What do you mean?"

"The arl is stricken with an illness that threatens his life. We have found no cure, either natural or magical."

Cathiel and Alistair exchanged a look. "When did this happen?" Alistair asked.

"Only a few weeks ago, but he has declined quickly. No one knows the nature of the illness, and even magic has done little to slow its progress." He sighed. "Our only hope now is a miracle. Every knight of Redcliffe has done in search of the Urn of Sacred Ashes. Andraste's ashes are said to cure any illness. But I fear we are chasing a fable. With each day, my hope dims."

Cathiel sighed, then reached into her belt pouch. "Your friend Ser Henric is dead. I have something of his." She offered him the items she'd found on the knight the bandits had killed.

"What?" Ser Donall was horrified. "And you have his locket? And a note?" He sighed. "Maker's mercy. Thank you for giving me these. I would never have known otherwise."

"We dealt with the bandits that killed him," Cathiel said, offering what small consolation she could.

"Thank you. I wonder how many of us have met similar fates on this mad quest." He sighed, and went back to his book.

#

Jerath was heading towards the stream when a voice stopped him. An elvish family stood by the water. The father nodded to him. "Greetings to you, good ser. If it... isn't too much to ask, might you spare some bread? Or anything?"

Jerath handed him the coinpurse he'd nicked from the rude merchant. "Here."

The man's eyes widened in stunned gratitude. "Thank you, that's very kind."

"Bless you! I knew another elf would help us!" the woman beamed at him.

He started to walk away, then turned back around. The man caught his eye. "Thank you again for helping us. It's been difficult since we were robbed."

"You were robbed?"

The man sighed. "Wasn't everyone? Those bandits have jumped every wagon and caravan in sight of Lothering."

"I met those bandits," Jerath said. He touched the hilt of his sword. "They're dead now."

"You..." The man's eyes nearly fell out of his head. "Killed them?"

"That's wonderful news! Perhaps our belongings are still

there!"

"I can't thank you enough, friend." The man shook his head, his smile broad. "Even if we don't get everything back, it's good to know others will be safe." He took his daughter's hand, and began walking towards where the bandits had been.

The girl looked back at him as she followed her father. Her eyes were huge. She was looking at him as if he was some kind of hero. In the back of his mind, the rage felt... sated. He shifted a bit uncomfortably, and then went to catch up with Morrigan.

27. Chapter 27

Saitada listened idly as Leliana filled them in on the news that had come out of Ostagar. They walked as they talked, and found themselves on the outskirts of the village. Saitada blinked. A man stood in a cage. He was easily the biggest man she'd ever seen, and there was something odd about the cast of his features. She approached.

He looked down at her. "You aren't one of my captors."

"I remember the revered mother mentioning this man," Leliana said. "She called him a savage from the far north."

"I have nothing to say that would amuse a dwarf. Leave me in peace."

"You're a prisoner?" Brehan asked. "Who put you here?"

"I am in a cage, am I not?" The man spoke patiently, almost as if to a child. "I've been placed here by the Chantry."

"The revered mother said he slaughtered an entire family. Even the children."

His tone became regretful. "It is as she says." He folded his arms. "I am Sten of the Beresaad - the vanguard - of the qunari peoples."

"I am Saitada. Pleased to meet you."

"You mock me." He narrowed his eyes. "Or you show manners I have not come to expect in your lands." He shrugged. "Though it matters little, now. I will die soon enough."

"Are you..." Leliana looked from Brehan to Saitada. "Just going to leave him here? To die like an animal? This is too cruel a punishment, even for a murderer."

"I suggest you leave me to my fate," Sten said.

Saitada considered a moment. They were short of resources, short of manpower, and she'd seen what the qunari mercenaries employed by the carta could do. "I find myself in need of skilled help."

"No doubt," he said dryly. "What help do you seek?"

"I am sworn to defend the land against the Blight."

"The Blight? Are you a Grey Warden, then?"

"Yes. I am."

"Surprising." He gave her a considering look. "My people have heard legends of the Grey Wardens' strength and skill... though I suppose not every legend is true."

She wondered what it said about her that she found his dry sarcasm amusing. "Would the revered mother let you free?"

"Perhaps if you told her the Grey Wardens need my assistance. It seems as likely to bring my death as waiting here," he said. She watched his eyes. He was not quite as disinterested in the idea as he was pretending.

Saitada glanced at Leliana. "Well?"

"She'd be in the chantry," Leliana replied.

Saitada nodded, then looked back at Sten. "I'll leave you for now."

"Farewell, then. My thanks, dwarf."

#

Leliana led them to the Chantry. Saitada noted that Alistair and Cathiel were already there, both kneeling in prayer. Cathiel noted her, then nudged Alistair, and the two came to join them. Saitada and Brehan followed Leliana into the chantry.

Saitada glanced at Brehan. The Dalish man was visibly uncomfortable, and drawing stares from nearly everyone they passed. A couple templars went so far as to put their hands onto swords. Leliana's presence seemed to keep them at bay. The sister led them into a room off to the side.

A middle aged woman in somewhat more ornate robes was sitting in the room. She smiled up at Leliana. "Good day, Sister Leliana. I'm surprised to see you're still in Lothering."

"It is good to see you as well, your Reverence," Leliana said, her voice filled with respect.

"I do not recognize your companions. Greetings. Will you be making a donation to the chantry? Our need has never been greater."

To Saitada's surprise, Brehan stepped forward. He offered a small trinket, and Saitada recognized it as the one he'd fought Jerath for back at the barn. "I fear we have little to offer," he said, bowing his head. "But perhaps this can fetch a price."

She accepted, and then her eyes widened as she took a closer look. "These poor souls will weep at your generosity. Thank you," she said. She smiled. "What can I do for you, then?"

"I want to talk about Sten, the qunari you imprisoned," Saitada said.

Her voice became weary, and a bit uncertain. "It might have been kinder to execute him, but I leave his fate to the Maker. Why does he interest you?"

"Is there any way I can convince you to release him?"

"Then his next victims might count you and me as their murderers."

"I was thinking you might release him into my custody." Saitada met her eyes. "Defending against the Blight, as a

form of atonement."

"And what do you say on this, Leliana? You know your friend better than I."

"These are... unusual times, your Reverence. With us, the qunari might do some good." She looked at Saitada and Brehan, and smiled. "I am sure of it, in fact."

"Were things not so desperate... very well, I trust you. Take these keys to his cage, and Maker watch over you."

"Thank you, your Reverence. Your trust is not misplaced."

#

Saitada undid the lock on the cage. "And so it is done," Sten said. "I will follow you into battle. In doing so I shall find my atonement."

"Thank you, Sten. Glad to have you with us," Saitada said.

"May we proceed?" He looked around. "I am eager to be elsewhere."

She looked around, and saw Brosca, Lenore, Jerath, and Morrigan heading in her direction. She blinked. They looked as though they'd seen recent combat. "Trouble?"

"Nothing we couldn't handle," Brosca said. "Ran a few errands for coin." He patted his belt pouch. "Up to seven sovereigns. I think we've done all we can here." He glanced at Jerath.

"Some dumbasses wanting the bounty mistook the kid here for an easy mark. We might want to get a move on before anybody gets notions of revenge."

"Let's head out."

#

"Darkspawn ahead," Brehan reported. He cocked his head to the side. "Two genlocks, three hurlocks, one hurlock alpha."

Saitada drew her sword. "We've got work, people."

It took them only moments to take out the small band. The dwarven merchant was grateful as he collected his scattered gear. He pressed a small carved stone into Cathiel's hand, assuring her it was lucky.

The merchant caught up with them again when they stopped to make camp, and asked to share their camp. Saitada watched as Brosca almost immediately set about dickering to improve their gear. Lenore joined him, talking to the merchant's son.

Saitada gave the qunari an appraising look. "Why are we stopping?" he asked.

"It will be night soon enough, and we'll be lucky to find another campsite this suitable. We're working together, I think I should get to know you."

He shook his head. "There are darkspawn to be fought. Is this

delay needful?"

She smiled at his impatience then looked him over again. "Are you all right? You were in that cage a while."

"You are concerned?" He gave her a surprised look. "No need. I am fit enough to fight."

"You said you were in the army?"

"I am."

"Why would the qunari send soldiers here?"

"The antaam are the eyes, hands, and mouth of the qunari. We are how my people know the world."

She cocked her head to the side. "Doesn't that make your view of things a little skewed?"

"Compared to what?"

"Well..." She laughed. "Good question."

"What does anyone truly know of the world? The world changes. We change. The antaam observe what we can, just as you do. There is no point to this. We are keeping the darkspawn waiting."

"True. Let's see if our new friend has any armor that would suit you."

"As you wish."

#

"Yes?" Alistair said.

"Tell me a little about yourself," Cathiel said.

"You first. Did you want to become a Grey Warden?"

"I asked you first."

"You asked in general; I'm asking in particular."

She sighed. "I did. And I didn't. And I did. It's... complicated."

"I was training as a templar for the Chantry before Duncan recruited me. That was a while ago." He sighed.

"So you're not happy in the Grey Wardens?"

"Far from it," Alistair said. "I never wanted to be a templar, anyway." He looked off in the distance. "Duncan saw I wasn't happy, and figured my training against mages could double for fighting darkspawn. Now, here I stand a proud Grey Warden. The grand cleric wouldn't have let me go if Duncan never forced the issue. I'll always be grateful to him."

"You speak fondly of Duncan," she said.

"I spent years in that chantry, hopelessly resigned to my fate. Duncan was the first person who cared what I wanted." He

smiled, his eyes sad. "He risked a lot of trouble with the grand cleric to help me."

"Maybe Duncan thought you'd be useful."

"Or maybe he just happens to be a good man." Alistair's voice was sharp. Then his shoulders slumped. "Maybe he was a good man."

"I'm sorry." She sighed. "I suppose I owed him as well. He saved me."

Alistair nodded fondly. "That sounds familiar." He looked over at where the dwarven woman was talking to the qunari. "At the camp, he and Saitada were..."

"They shared a tent most of the way to Ostagar."

"I'm glad." He immediately started blushing. "I don't mean... I just meant..."

"You're glad they had some time together."

"Yeah."

"We should let her know about Arl Eamon."

"I suppose we better."

#

Saitada sighed when Alistair and Cathiel reported to her what

Ser Donall had said. "It has been my experience that there is truly no such thing as coincidence. Arl Eamon gets sick just as Loghain betrays his king?" She shook her head. "Redcliff is still our destination. Even if Arl Eamon is indisposed, it's still our best chance. And perhaps there is something we could do to aid him."

"The urn of sacred ashes?" Alistair asked.

"We will need to visit the circle," Saitada said. "Perhaps we can find more information there. What did that note say?"

"It mentioned Brother Genitivi," Cathiel said.

"I know the name. Perhaps that's also a lead worth following. Denerim, however, may not be the safest place for us."

"We need to bring Loghain to justice," Alistair said.

Saitada rested her hand on her blade. "I agree, but the Blight must come first." She looked up at Alistair. "Put aside thoughts of feeding Loghain feet first to a genlock."

"I... wasn't thinking that..."

"Oh. Must just be me then."

"I'm thinking it now though. Good thought."

"Get some sleep."

"So, Alistair, how did you become a Grey Warden?" Brehan asked.

"Same way you did. You drink some blood, you choke on it and pass out. You haven't forgotten already, have you?"

"Ha. Ha. Very funny." Brehan turned the spit over the fire. "You want dinner or not?"

"Let's see, I was in the Chantry before. I trained for many years to become a templar, in fact. That's where I learned most of my skills."

Lenore's head came up. "You were a mage-hunter?"

He nodded. "That's what I was trained for, though I never got to hunt any actual mages. I ended up joining the Grey Wardens before I took the sacramental vows." He shrugged. "It's really for the best. I'm not exactly the Chantry type, if you haven't noticed. I don't think I would have made a very good templar." A note of melancholy entered his voice. "The grand cleric didn't want to let me go. Duncan was forced to conscript me, actually, and was she ever furious when he did. I thought she was going to have us both arrested. I was lucky."

"Why did the grand cleric want to keep you?" Brosca asked.

"I wondered that myself. It's not as if she valued me highly. I think she just didn't want to give anything to the Grey Wardens, is all." He brought his plate to Brehan as Brehan

began slicing pieces from the haunch. "The Chantry didn't lose much. And I think I can do more fighting the Blight anyhow rather than sitting in a temple somewhere. I'll always be thankful to Duncan for recruiting me. If it hadn't been for him, you know, I would never... I wouldn't have..."

"He was a good man," Brosca said. He glanced at Saitada, who sat silently.

"He was," Alistair said. "A good man who didn't deserve his fate, that much I'm sure of."

Lenore sighed. "I keep expecting to look over my shoulder and see him catching up to us, all gruff and wondering why we haven't killed all the darkspawn yet." She sighed. "I mean, he was the Commander of the Grey. If anyone could have..." She looked at Jerath. "You saw the battle. Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I mean, how sure..." Lenore bit her lip. "Did you see..."

"If Flemeth could save us, surely she could have helped him," Brosca said. "Couldn't she?"

"Rather not talk about it," Jerath said.

#

Saitada awoke with a start, the image of the dragon seared into her mind. She shivered.

"Bad dreams, huh?" Alistair said.

She stood, and walked to the campfire. "Must have been something I ate."

"Drank, more like. As in the tainted blood, remember?" Alistair sighed. "You see, part of being a Grey Warden is being able to hear the darkspawn. That's what your dream was. Hearing them."

"Duncan told me. Experiencing is a somewhat different matter." She poked at the fire, then looked up as Jerath handed her a cup of tea.

"The archdemon, it... 'talks' to the horde, and we feel it just as they do. That's why we know this is really a Blight."

"Are these dreams going to happen a lot?" Saitada asked.

"It takes a bit, but eventually you can block the dreams out. Some of the older Grey Wardens say they can understand the archdemon a bit, but I sure can't. Anyhow, when I heard you thrashing around, I thought I should tell you. It was scary at first for me, too."

Saitada looked around the camp. She could see Brehan twitching in his sleep. "Any other surprises I should know about?"

"Other than dying young and the whole defeat the Blight alone thing? No, I'm all tapped out for surprises. Anyhow, you're up

now, right? I should get some sleep."

She watched him go back to his bedroll, then looked up at Jerath. "The dreams woke you too?"

"No. Alistair did, just before you woke. Second watch."

She nodded. "You can go back to sleep if you want."

"I'm good."

Clouds drifted over the stars. She sighed, and poked the fire with a stick. "Were you a thief?" He raised his eyebrow at her. "Duncan showed up at that inn, you in tow, and we had to leave town. He conscripted you. Were you a thief, like Daveth?"

"No."

"I won't hold it against you. Brosca used to beat people up for the carta, and I don't hold that against him. What did you do that Duncan had to conscript you out from under the guard?"

"Duncan said we put our pasts behind us, when we become Wardens."

"Fair enough."

#

Saitada gestured to Cathiel and Alistair. "Tell me about this Arl Eamon."

"His sister, Rowan, was Cailan's mother. I've only met Eamon once," Cathiel said. "A few nobles wanted my father to take the crown after Maric died. He refused, and stood with Arl Eamon in support of Cailan."

Saitada nodded, then looked towards Alistair. "You said this Arl Eamon raised you?"

"Did I say that?" He smiled innocently. "I meant that dogs raised me. Giant, slobbering dogs from the Anderfels. A whole pack of them, in fact."

Cathiel grinned. "Really? That must have been tough for them."

"Well, they were flying dogs, you see. Surprisingly strict parents, too, and devout Andrastians, to boot."

"Do you write, at least? I bet your mother's a bitch."

He threw his head back and laughed. "All right, all right! I give! I cannot match your rapier wit!"

Saitada sighed. At least morale was high. "Are you two finished?"

Alistair nodded. "Let's see. How do I explain this? I'm a bastard." He glanced at where Cathiel was opening her mouth and continued quickly. "And before you make any smart comments, I mean the fatherless kind." He looked back at Saitada. "My mother was a serving girl in Redcliffe Castle

who died when I was very young. Arl Eamon wasn't my father, but he took me in anyhow and put a roof over my head. He was good to me, and he didn't have to be. I respect the man and I don't blame him any more for sending me off to the Chantry once I was old enough."

"He wasn't your father?" Cathiel asked. "So you know who is?"

"I know who I was told was my father. He died even before my mother did, anyhow. It isn't important. Arl Eamon eventually married a young woman from Orlais, which caused all sorts of problems between him and the king because it was so soon after the war. But he loved her."

"No accounting for taste," Cathiel muttered.

Alistair grinned at her. "Anyhow, the new arlessa resented the rumors which pegged me as his bastard. They weren't true, but of course they existed. The arl didn't care, but she did. So off I was packed to the nearest monastery at age ten. Just as well. The arlessa made sure the castle wasn't a home to me by that point. She despised me." His tone made it clear the feeling was mutual.

Cathiel shook her head. "What an awful thing to do to a child."

"Maybe. She felt threatened by my presence, I can see that now. I can't say I blame her. She wondered if the rumors were true herself, I bet." He shrugged. "I remember I had an amulet with Andraste's holy symbol on it. The only thing I had

of my mother's I was so furious at being sent away I tore it off and threw it at the wall and it shattered." He sighed regretfully. "Stupid, stupid thing to do. The arl came by the monastery a few times to see how I was, but I was stubborn. I hated it there and blamed him for everything... and eventually he just stopped coming."

"You were young," Cathiel said, and laid a sympathetic hand on his arm.

He smiled at her. "And raised by dogs. Or I may as well have been, the way I acted. But maybe all young bastards act like that, I don't know." He looked back at Saitada. "All I know is the arl is a good man and well-loved by the people. He was also King Cailan's uncle, so he has a personal motivation to see Loghain pay for what he did. Anyway... that's really all there is to the story."

Saitada nodded, as gears began to turn in her mind. "We will be heading into Redcliffe. I can't say I like what you've said about the Arlessa, but even if Arl Eamon is indisposed, there must be people there who can aid us."

"What about Bann Teagan?" Cathiel asked Alistair.

"Who is Bann Teagan?"

"Arl Eamon's younger brother," Alistair said. "If Arl Eamon is ill, Bann Teagan would be the one to talk to."

"Then let's go find this Bann Teagan."

#

"Slobbering dogs, eh?" Cathiel elbowed Alistair. "That would explain the smell."

"Well, it wasn't until I was eight that I discovered you didn't have to lick yourself clean. Old habits die hard, you know."

She waved a hand in front of her face. "That would explain the breath as well, then."

"And my table manners, too. Though, come to think of it, they weren't all that different from the other templars." He looked up at the sky. "Or did I dream all of that? Funny the dreams you'll have when you sleep on the cold, hard ground, isn't it? Are you having strange dreams?"

She gave him a coy look. "Only ones where we're making mad love in my tent."

He turned bright red. "I... oh. I think I... completely lost my chain of thought..." He brightened. "Oh, there it is. You seem to be okay with Saitada in charge now."

Cathiel sighed. "Truth be told, she's more qualified. Certainly knows more about darkspawn and leading armies than I do." She shrugged. "Do you want to talk about Duncan?"

"You don't have to do that. I know you didn't know him as long as I did."

"He was like a father to you. I understand."

He met her eyes, and nodded. "I... should have handled it better. Duncan warned me right from the beginning that this could happen." He sighed, then looked back towards the camp, face grim. "Any of us could die in battle. I shouldn't have lost it, not when so much is riding on us, not with the Blight and... and everything. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize for grief."

"How stupid of me," he said, looking at her. "Here I am going on and on about Duncan and you... I'm so sorry." He put an arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into him. They sat for some time, lost in their mutual grief.

"We should get some sleep," Cathiel said, looking up at the sky.

"I suppose you are right." He smiled at her. "Thank you. It was good to talk about this with a friend. It means a lot to me."

"And to me," Cathiel said. She rose, and went to find her bedroll.

#

"How many of those potions are you planning on making?" Brosca asked.

"As many as Brehan can find ingredients for," Lenore replied. "The way we seem to be finding trouble, having as much

elfroot on hand as possible seems like a good idea. And in a pinch, we can trade them for other supplies." She glanced at the herbs he was picking through. "Are darkspawn actually vulnerable to poison?"

"Yeah. I know, funny ain't it? I mean, it won't kill them, but it can slow them a bit. And we've got those other problems too."

"You said there is one that makes it harder for folks to cast spells?"

"Yeah."

"Teach me the recipe? We could dip Cathiel's arrowheads for when there are emissaries about."

"Good idea."

Half an hour later, they had a batch going. Alistair sauntered up. "Ooh, what's for dinner?" He bent to dip his finger in the pot.

"Not that!" they both yelled.

He jumped back, startled. "Um..."

"What's going on?" Saitada asked.

"Oh, we were making poison," Lenore said. "Alistair tried to stick his finger in it."

Brehan blinked. "You two did happen to recall those were the

only pots we have, right?"

Lenore and Brosca exchanged a look. "Um... opps?" Brosca offered.

"On the bright side, emissaries are going to be less of a problem now." Lenore began rummaging for vials.

"Oh for..." Saitada sighed. "Brehan, see if our merchant friends have any more pots. You two..." She shook her head. "Maybe not so close to the cooking fire?" She glanced at the vials Lenore was holding. "Weren't you supposed to be making elfroot potions?"

"Oh. I did."

"Right. Make sure you label everything. Clearly."

"The green ones are elfroot, and the reddish brown ones are poison."

"Label. Everything." Saitada rubbed her forehead. "And store them separately."

"Okay."

#

"What were you doing in that cage?" Saitada asked.

"Sitting, as you observed," Sten replied.

Saitada sighed. She'd asked for that one. "Very funny."

"Thank you."

"Are you going to answer my question?"

"I did." She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw the corner of his mouth twitch just a little. "Parshaara. Was there anything else?"

"Why did you come to Ferelden?"

"To answer a question."

"What was the question?"

"The arishok asked, 'what is the blight?' By his curiosity, I am now here."

"Why would the qunari care about the Blight?"

He looked down at her. "Why do you?"

"I'm a Grey Warden." She shrugged, her tone matter of fact. "It's my job."

This time, the corners of his mouth did lift slightly. "Exactly. You don't ask. Nor do I. The arishok sends me, and I go."

"Don't you have to report back, then?"

"Yes."

"When are you going to do that?"

"Never." He looked away. "I cannot go home."

She knew that feeling. "Well, you can stay with us."

He looked down at her again, eyes slightly widened. "Thank you." He glanced off at the horizon. "Can we move on? We keep the darkspawn waiting."

"Let's go, people."

28. Chapter 28

"We should be at Redcliffe in time for lunch," Alistair said as they broke camp.

"Good," Brosca said. "Could do with a pint or four."

"Save some for the rest of us," Lenore said as she slung her pack over her shoulder.

Saitada looked around. "Arl Eamon should be an ally, but we still don't know what kind of reception we are going to get in Redcliffe." She considered a moment. "Brehan and Leliana, you take point."

#

"What do you know of this place?" Brehan asked as they walked ahead of the others.

"Redcliffe?" Leliana considered a moment. "I know little of it, except that it is the domain of the arl of Redcliffe." She shrugged. "Redcliffe... I wonder how the name came to be. Is the clay here red? There are places in this world where the clay is a bright, strange red, and often, in the legends of such places, it is the red of blood. The blood of a thousand men slaughtered in battle, or that of an innocent unjustly slain; it

stains the land that it may never be forgotten. Perhaps Redcliffe has one such tale... but I do not know it."

"At the base of the Frostbacks, where they meet the Wilds, there is a place where the trees leaf in red. It is where the witch, Ikarya, tricked the brothers Jikar and Atlayan into fighting each other. Atlayan feared his brother had fallen under her spell. Jikar saw only her beauty, and was too proud to believe that he had been deceived. Enraged, he attacked his brother, and dealt a mortal blow. It was only when he heard Ikarya's laughter that he realized what he had done."

Leliana raised an eyebrow. "I would like to hear this story."

"There are several versions of the song. Most versions have Jikar giving in to his rage, and chasing the pride demon Ikarya across the sky."

She smiled at him. "Have you ever seen this place?"

"From a distance only. Our keeper did not allow us to venture near. The veil is thin there, she said." He glanced back over his shoulder. He could not see the others, but he could still sense their presence behind him. If he concentrated, he could tell which of them was which. It felt odd sometimes. He turned back to Leliana. "This vision of yours..."

"I knew this would come up sooner or later." She sighed. "I don't know how to explain, but I had a dream... In it there was an impenetrable darkness... it was so dense, so real. And there was a noise, a terrible, ungodly noise..." Her eyes grew

distant with memory. "I stood on a peak and watched as the darkness consumed everything... and when the storm swallowed the last of the sun's light, I..." She shivered slightly. "I fell, and the darkness drew me in..."

"You dreamed of the Blight?"

"I suppose I did. That was what the darkness was, no?" She rubbed her arms as if warding off a chill. "When I woke, I went to the chantry's gardens, as I always do. But that day, the rosebush in the corner had flowered..." Her voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Everyone knew that bush was dead. It was grey and twisted and gnarled - the ugliest thing you ever saw, but there it was - a single, beautiful rose." She smiled. "It was as though the Maker stretched out His hand to say: 'Even in the midst of this darkness, there is hope and beauty. Have faith'."

He found himself drawn in by the sincere emotion in her voice, and smiled. "And this made you want to help us?"

"In my dream, I fell, or... or maybe I jumped... I'd do anything to stop the Blight. I know that we can do it." She spread her hands. "There are so many good things in the Maker's world. How can I sit by while the Blight devours... everything?"

"I suppose I couldn't sit by either."

She touched his shoulder lightly. "That is why you are a Grey Warden."

He blinked, then looked up at the sky. Then he smiled. Maybe she was right.

#

Saitada nodded as Leliana returned to say that Brehan had sighted a settlement ahead. The chantry sister gave her report, and then lengthened her stride to rejoin Brehan. Saitada hitched her pack slightly on her shoulder.

Behind her, Alistair spoke up. "Look, can we talk for a moment?" She turned to look at him. He shuffled his feet, and looked embarrassed. "I need to tell you something I, ah, probably should have told you earlier."

Saitada raised an eyebrow, and then frowned. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

He sighed, and looked from her to Cathiel and then back again. "I don't know. I doubt it. I've never liked it, that's for sure." He ran a hand through his hair. "I told you before how Arl Eamon raised me, right? That my mother was a serving girl at the castle and he took me in?" Saitada felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Alistair continued, "the reason he did that was because..." He looked away, twisted his foot, and his expression became pained. "Well, because my father was King Maric. Which made Cailan my... half-brother, I suppose."

Saitada put a hand to her face. Cathiel just stared at him. "So... you're not just a bastard," Cathiel said, "but a royal

bastard?"

Alistair let out a small laugh. "Yes, I guess it does at that. I should use that line more often."

"Why did you wait to tell me this?" Saitada asked.

Alistair shifted uncomfortably under her glare. "I would have told you, but... it never really meant anything to me. I was inconvenient, a possible threat to Cailan's rule and so they kept me secret. I've never talked about it to anyone." He wasn't quite able to meet her eyes. "Everyone who knew either resented me for it or they coddled me... even Duncan kept me out of the fighting because of it. I didn't want you to know, as long as possible." He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

Saitada considered a moment. "Does Loghain know?"

"Why wouldn't he? He was King Maric's best friend. I don't know if that means anything, though... I certainly never considered the idea that it might ever be important."

She stared at him. For a moment, she gave serious consideration to calling Jerath or Sten to hold Alistair so that she could attempt to beat sense into him. Then she sighed. "I think I understand."

He sighed. "Good. I'm glad. It's not like I got special treatment for it, anyhow." Saitada nearly gave in to the idea of smacking him again. He'd been sent from the fight with six warden bodyguards, and still didn't think he got special treatment. At

least Cailan's actions made some sense to her now. He continued speaking. "At any rate, that's it. That's what I had to tell you. I thought you should know about it."

"Are you sure?" Cathiel asked. "You're not hiding anything else?"

"Besides my unholy love of fine cheeses and a minor obsession with my hair, no. That's it. Just the prince thing."

"You're a prince. Somehow I find that very... thrilling," Cathiel said in a teasing voice.

"Oh! Did I just find the one damn decent thing about my birthright? I think I did."

Saitada decided she was going to just start hitting both of them. Then what Cathiel had said earlier came back to mind. "You're heir to the throne, then?" Saitada asked.

Actual panic showed on Alistair's face. "Let's hope not. I'm the son of a commoner, and a Grey Warden to boot. It was made very clear to me early on that there was no room for me raising any rebellions or such nonsense. And that's fine by me. No, if there's an heir to be found, it's Arl Eamon himself. He's not of royal blood, but he is Cailan's uncle... and more importantly, very popular with the people." He frowned. "Though... if he's really as sick as we've heard... no, I don't want to think about that. I really don't." He shuffled his feet again. "So there you have it. Now can we move on, and I'll just pretend you still think I'm some... nobody who was too lucky

to die with the rest of the Grey Wardens."

"And what does that make us?" Saitada asked wryly. Inwardly, she was a bit relieved. At least now she had the makings of a backup plan if Arl Eamon was unable to help them.

Alistair smiled. "The reason I think we have a chance of setting things right."

#

They caught up with Brehan a couple minutes later. He pointed. "City ahead." He glanced back at Saitada. "Something's off."

"Darkspawn?"

"No. Just..." He shrugged. "Maybe it's just me not liking cities."

She looked at him for a moment, then glanced back at the others. "Everyone be on your guard." She considered. "Jerath, Morrigan, you two stay back a bit. I'll signal if there is trouble. Brosca, Brehan, eyes open. Lenore, keep your eyes and whatever you mages use to sniff out magic open. Sten, look scary. Let's go."

A man came across the bridge to meet them. Rather than be intimidated by the party approaching him, he actually looked relieved. "I thought I saw travelers coming down the road, though I scarcely believed it." His voice was incredulous.

"Have you come to help us?"

Saitada glanced over her shoulder at Alistair. Alistair only shrugged in response. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Is there a problem?"

He blinked. "So you... don't know? Has nobody out there heard?"

"I've heard Arl Eamon is sick, if that's what you mean."

"He could be dead, for all we know. Nobody's heard from the castle in days." He wrung his hands. "We're under attack. Monsters come out of the castle every night and attack us until dawn. Everyone's been fighting... and dying." He shook his head. "We've no army to defend us, no arl and no king to send us help. So many are dead, and those left are terrified they're next."

Alistair spoke up. "Hold on. What is this evil that's attacking you?"

"I... I don't rightly know; I'm sorry. Nobody does." He looked back over his shoulder. "I should take you to Bann Teagan. He's all that's holding us together. He'll want to see you. He's just over there in the chantry. Please, come..."

Saitada glanced at the others, then signaled for Jerath and Morrigan to join them. "We're coming."

#

The man, Tomas, led them into the chantry. Wounded people were everywhere, and children huddled together under the watchful eyes of bedraggled parents. Their small party garnered stares, and Saitada found herself a little intimidated by the hope she could see starting to dawn on some of the faces.

A man in slightly finer clothes than the others looked up as they entered. "It's... Tomas, yes? And who are these people with you?" He looked them over. "They're obviously not simple travelers."

"No my lord," Tomas said. "They just arrived, and I thought you would want to see them."

"Well done, Tomas." He gave them an appraising look, then met Saitada's eyes. "Greetings, friends. My name is Teagan, Bann of Rainesfere, brother to the arl."

"I remember you, Bann Teagan," Alistair said. "Though the last time we met I was a lot younger and..." His voice became slightly embarrassed. "...covered in mud."

"Covered in mud?" Recognition dawned on Teagan's face, and he smiled widely. "Alistair? Is is you, isn't it? You're alive! This is wonderful news."

"Still alive, yes, though not for long if Teryn Loghain has anything to say about it."

"Indeed." Teagan's voice was grim. "Loghain would have us

believe all Grey Wardens died along with my nephew, amongst other things."

Saitada smiled. "You don't believe Loghain's lies?"

Teagan actually snorted. "What, that he pulled his men in order to save them? That Cailan risked everything in the name of glory? Hardly." His voice was bitter. "Loghain calls the Grey Wardens traitors, murderers of the king. I don't believe it. It is an act of a desperate man. So... you are a Grey Warden as well? A pleasure you meet you. I wish it were under better circumstances."

Alistair quickly stepped in to make introductions. Saitada smiled. She found herself rather liking this Teagan. He reminded her a bit of Gorim. Teagan gave them all a slight bow. "You're here to see my brother? Unfortunately, that might be a problem. Eamon is gravely ill." He sighed. "No one has heard from the castle in days. No guards patrol the walls, and no one has responded to my shouts. The attacks started a few nights ago. Evil... things... surged from the castle. We drove them back, but many perished during the assault."

"What evil things are you talking about?" Saitada asked.

"Some call them the walking dead; decomposing corpses returning to life with a hunger for human flesh... They hit again the next night. Each night they come, with greater numbers." He shook his head grimly. "With Cailan dead and Loghain starting a war over the throne, no one responds to my urgent calls for help. I have a feeling tonight's assault will be the

worst yet." His eyes went to Alistair. "Alistair, I hate to ask, but I desperately need the help of you and your friends."

"It isn't just up to me." Alistair looked at Saitada, his own face desperate. "Though the Grey Wardens don't stand much chance against Loghain without Arl Eamon."

Saitada gave him a reassuring nod. "Of course we'll help." She heard Morrigan mutter something that sounded disapproving.

Sten's voice she could actually make out. "There are no darkspawn here, and nothing to gain. It is a fool's errand."

Saitada channeled twenty five years of growing up in the royal palace into her voice as she turned to look at him. "If there's a chance to rescue the arl, we have to try." If there was a chance to salvage the reputation of the Grey Wardens and turn the surviving people into an army, they had to try.

"Perhaps," Sten said. He looked as if he wanted to say something else, but went silent instead.

"Thank you!" Teagan said, hope finally entering his face. "Thank you, this... means more to me than you can guess." He looked around. "Now, then. There is much to do before night falls. I've put two men in charge of the defense outside. Murdock, the village mayor, is outside the chantry. Ser Perth, one of Eamon's knights, is just up the cliff at the windmill, watching the castle. You may discuss with them the preparations for the coming battle."

Saitada nodded then turned to her companions. "Lenore, see what you can do about tending to the wounded. Get as many people on their feet as you can. Morrigan, help her. The rest of you, with me."

#

After talking with Murdock, Saitada began giving directions to the rest of the wardens. She sent Brehan to check along the path the dead used, and to possibly set up some of Brosca's traps. Leliana accompanied him. Jerath, Sten, and Brosca she sent to round up any more potential defenders. Flanked by Alistair and Cathiel, she went to go speak with the blacksmith.

#

Brosca followed Jerath into the first house. The qunari stayed at the back, watching the door.

"That dresser appears to be breathing," Brosca observed dryly.

From inside the dresser, a voice yelled, "go away! This isn't your home!"

Sten folded his arms. "A small human. I say burn it out."

Brosca grinned back at him before reaching for the dresser door. The boy was already tumbling out. "Ahh! What are you doing? All right, I'll come out!" Brosca tried to keep a straight face. The poor child actually looked terrified. "Please don't

hurt me! I'll go back to the chantry if you want! I didn't mean any harm!"

"Your sister is looking for you, you know," Jerath said. Brosca shot him a questioning look. Jerath twitched a shoulder.

"I just... didn't want to be at the chantry anymore. Everyone's scared, and I want to be brave."

Brosca raised an eyebrow at the boy. "How is hiding in a dresser being brave?"

"I wasn't always in here! I hid when I heard you coming. I was..." He cut himself off. "Well, I shouldn't tell you. It's a secret."

"Are you sure? Maybe I could help you," Brosca said.

"You... could? All right... I guess." He shrugged. "I just... Father said I could have his sword when I grew up. It was Grandfather's, and Grandfather was a great dragon-slayer." He sighed. "I thought... if I was brave like Grandfather, I could use his sword and..." Tears welled up in his eyes. "Kill the bad people who killed Mother."

Brosca felt a trace of panic as the kid started to cry. "You had the right idea," Jerath said calmly. "You are indeed very brave."

"Thank you, ser," the boy said, his voice hitching from crying. "But the sword is too heavy for me. I... guess I'm not as

strong as someone like you."

"Where is the sword now?" Brosca asked.

"In the chest in Mother's room. Father gave me a key, but I'm not supposed to give it to anyone."

"Perhaps I could help you and your sister in return?" Jerath offered.

The boy's eyes widened hopefully. "You could? Maybe you could... give my sister money? She said if we had money we'd be all right, even if Mother is dead."

"I'll talk to your sister about it. I promise," Jerath said.

"All right. Here is the key. I hope you use it to kill a lot of those bad people."

"He will," Brosca told the boy. "It's what he does."

"I should... go back to the chantry. Good luck." The boy ran off.

"Let's see this dragon-slaying sword then," Brosca said. He let out a low whistle when Jerath recovered the blade. "Fair sight better than that dull thing you took of a bandit. Hang on to it."

#

"Heh. This door is locked." Brosca fiddled with the lock. "And

now it's not." He gestured for Sten to keep an eye out, and Jerath followed him into to the house.

A dwarf, flanked by two tattooed humans, stood in the room. He glared at Brosca. "Wonderful. Intruders. I hope you've a good reason for breaking and entering into my home."

Brosca put a smile on his face and spread his hands. "Is that how you greet a fellow dwarf?"

"Up here on the surface you'll find we're all the same. And that means unwelcome, even a fellow lowborn like yourself." He gave an annoyed shrug. "The name's Dwyn. Pleased to meet you. Now, kindly tell me why you're here."

"Murdock needs people for the militia."

Dwyn spat. "So? Murdock's sending a dwarf to do his begging for him? Hoping I'll get all misty-eyed with thoughts of home?" He folded his arms. "Look, I'll tell you the same thing I told him: I'm not risking my neck for this town."

"Can't I change your mind?" Brosca asked, smile still painted on his face.

"I'll put in a good word for you with Bann Teagan or the arl."

"And what good would that do me? The arl's probably dead and I couldn't care less what Teagan thinks of me. What else you got?"

Brosca was trying to think of something when behind him,

Jerath's voice came, low and soft. "Either die out there, or here and now."

Brosca blinked. Dwyn looked over Brosca's shoulder at the kid, and then, to Brosca's surprise, Dwyn actually paled a bit. "So that's what it comes down to, huh? Fine. I'll go, if you want me out there so badly."

"Thank you," Brosca said.

"Don't thank me. I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this because of you." He spat again. "Go tell Murdock he won. And I better see you out in the square when those creatures come." He walked out the door, flanked by his thugs.

Brosca raised an eyebrow at Jerath. Jerath just shrugged, and walked out of the room. "Huh," Brosca said. He glanced at Sten. "Junior is a little scary sometimes." He shrugged. "Let's round up whoever is in the tavern, and head back."

#

Brosca took a bit of pleasure in gouging Lloyd out of free drinks for the militia before sending him off to fight. He looked over his shoulder to see Jerath talking to another elf, and headed in that direction.

"Look, just because you're an elf doesn't mean we should... be friends. I was just told to... I mean... just leave me alone."

Brosca narrowed his eyes, then looked at Jerath. Jerath

flicked his eyes to Brosca, then back at the elf. Brosca nodded, and sidled up behind the other elf. "What do you mean?" Brosca asked. "What were you told to do?"

The elf jumped slightly. "Nothing. Nobody told me to do anything. Just because you're a Grey Warden doesn't mean you an go around threatening people!"

"And how do you know we are Grey Wardens?" Jerath asked, his voice calm.

"I just... overheard it. That's all. If you'll excuse me... I want to get to the chantry before the sun goes down."

"Mind explaining this letter I found?" Jerath held up a piece of parchment.

"What? How did you...? You stole that right out of my pocket!" Brosca grinned widely as the frightened elf babbled at Jerath. So, Junior was a pickpocket. "This is more than I bargained for. Look, they just paid me to watch the castle and send word if anything should change." He shook his head desperately. "But they never said anything about monsters! I haven't even been able to report anything since this started! I'm stuck, same as you, I swear!"

"Who are 'they'?" Brosca asked. "Who hired you to do this?"

"A tall fellow. I forget his name." The elf ran a hand through his hair as he looked back and forth between Jerath, Brosca, and Sten. "He, uh, said he was working for Howe. Arl Rendon

Howe. He's an important man, Teryn Loghain's right hand. So I didn't do anything wrong!"

"What are you supposed to watch the castle for?" Brosca asked.

"Just to report any changes, honest! All I could send word about was the arl getting sick. After that, monsters started coming from the castle."

"So you know how this happened? Tell me now." Brosca fingered his mace.

"I don't know anything about these creatures! When the arl got sick, I got scared that people would think I was involved. But I swear I don't know anything about it! They sent me to watch. Maybe they knew the arl would get sick. I don't know."

"How do I know you are telling the truth?"

"I just thought I was serving the king and making a bit of coin on the side. You have to believe me!"

Brosca nodded. "I think you should help defend Redcliffe tonight."

"Fitting," Sten said.

"All... all right." He sent Jerath a terrified look before turning to Brosca. "I'll do it. Thank you for your mercy, I won't forget it." He scrambled from his seat and practically flew out of the door.

"What tipped you off?" Brosca asked Jerath.

"An elf. Armed."

"You're an armed elf." Brosca considered a moment. "Which I guess proves your point. Let's get this to Saitada." He grinned. "Good fingers. I didn't even see you make the dip."

Jerath offered him a purse. Brosca took it, and raised an eyebrow. "He did say he'd been paid," Jerath said.

Brosca laughed.

#

She had to agree to rescue a maiden from the castle, but the smith started readying weapons. Ser Perth wanted magical amulets for his guards. A symbol was a symbol. The mother at the chantry was reluctant at first, but between Saitada's urging and Lenore's healing everyone in sight, she eventually relented and agreed to provide the knights with charms.

The letter Brosca gave her just confirmed her earlier suspicions. Cathiel paced angrily. "Howe. It comes back to Howe. Teryn Loghain's right hand man?" She fingered her bowstring.

"Disturbing news indeed," Teagan said. He looked at Saitada. "Both Murdock and Ser Perth are ready for nightfall."

"We'll take up a position near the path. Brehan, how'd you do with those traps?"

"Found some oil," Brehan said. "That should do some of them in."

"Good work."

29. Chapter 29

She nodded to Ser Perth as they started taking positions. "Lenore, Morrigan, stay back. Focus on healing. Cathiel, Leliana, keep with the mages and use your arrows. Alistair, keep them off the casters and archers. Sten, you, Brehan and I will form a wall. Ser Perth, you and yours form the second line. Brosca, Jerath, stay mobile and flank where you can. Let's go."

Satisfaction lit the faces of both Brosca and Brehan as the traps began to thin the numbers. The satisfaction dimmed somewhat as the things kept coming. Beside her, Sten and Brehan set to work with their long blades. She stepped forward, blocking a corpse that attempted to get past Sten's sword and brought her own blade down. Now and then she saw Brosca or Jerath dart in and out of the fray. Brosca went low, cutting hamstrings and smashing knees, leaving the corpses easy targets for Perth's men or the fire. With a sword in each hand, Jerath resembled nothing so much as a whirlwind of blades, dancing here and there, as he cut down the dead.

The fire had burned out by the time the last wave had fallen. Lenore tended wounds quickly. Ser Perth started to offer congratulations, and then jerked his head as the alarm sounded from the village below. "More of them."

Saitada nodded. "Stay here," she told him. She looked to her companions. "Move."

#

The defenders stood in the rough palisade of spikes. Cathiel quickly grabbed more arrows, and tossed a full quiver to Leliana. She caught it and gave Cathiel a nod of thanks as they took their positions. Saitada called out instructions as the dead started to come, and the wardens took the front lines.

Cathiel kept up a steady stream of arrows. Beside her, Alistair used his shield and sword to take care of anything that got close to her and the mages. She smiled to herself. It was good having someone to watch her back. Griffon darted through the field, finishing off the few that still twitched and tried to drag themselves towards the villagers.

Her companions were doing the brunt of the work. Only a few of the villagers had even had to raise weapons. She nocked another arrow, and then searched for a target. After a moment, she let it down. "Is that all of..."

A corpse limped out from between two houses. Sten cut it in half with an almost casual swing of his greatsword. There was silence for several heartbeats. And then slowly, a cheer started to go up.

She listened as Saitada gave orders. In groups of two, the wardens searched out the few corpses still lingering in the village. Cathiel and Leliana remained at the palisade, bows in

hand, as they scanned for any remaining targets.

"Did we lose anyone?" Lenore asked.

"I don't think so," Cathiel replied.

"Thank the Maker," Leliana said. Her words were echoed by several of the villagers standing nearby.

#

Brehan wasn't sure he'd seen anything as lovely as that sunrise. They'd manage a couple hours respite, waiting with bated breath for the dawn to come.

Teagan stood before the chantry. "Dawn arrives, my friends, and all of us remain." He held up his hands. "We are victorious!" A great cheer met his words. He gestured towards them. "And it is these good folk you see beside me that we have to thank for our lives today. Without their heroism, surely we would all have perished." He turned towards them. "I bow to you, noble sers. The Maker smiled on us when he sent you here in our darkest hour."

"Thank you, Bann Teagan. We are honored," Saitada said, giving him a small bow.

Brehan looked around at the faces of all the people. Several met his eye and smiled warmly or waved. It was a strange feeling. Next to him, Leliana smiled. "This part of the story at least, has a happy ending."

"It does indeed," he said.

A woman from the chantry stepped forward, and began to pray for those that had fallen on previous nights.

"Gods above ease their passing," Brehan said quietly as she finished.

Teagan spoke again. "With the Maker's favor, the blow we delivered today is enough for me to enter the castle and seek out your arl. Be wary and watch for signs of renewed attack. We shall return with news as soon as we are able." He looked back to Saitada, and lowered his voice to just above a whisper. "Now, we've no time to waste. Meet me at the mill. We can talk further there."

#

"Odd how quiet the castle looks from here. You would think there was nobody inside at all," Teagan said as they arrived. He turned to them. "But I shouldn't delay thing further. I had a plan... to enter the castle after the village was secure." He fumbled with a ring on his finger. "There is a secret passage here, in the mill, accessible only to my family."

"That's convenient," Brosca said.

"Perhaps I should have gone into the castle earlier... but I could not leave the villagers -" He looked up. "Maker's breath!"

Saitada turned in the direction he was facing. A woman was heading in their direction, followed by several guards. She saw some of her companions reach for weapons, and gestured for them to stand down.

"Teagan! Thank the Maker you yet live!" Relief filled the woman's face as she approached them.

"Isolde! You're alive! How did you...?" He blinked. "What has happened?"

Isolde spoke in a rush. "I do not have much time to explain! I slipped away from the castles as soon as I saw the battle was over, and I must return quickly. And I..." She hesitated, and then her voice became firm. "Need you to return with me, Teagan. Alone."

Saitada shook her head. She had to be joking. "We will need more of an explanation than that."

Isolde gave her a confused look. "What? I..." She looked back at Teagan. "Who is this woman, Teagan?"

Alistair sighed. "You remember me, Lady Isolde, don't you?"

"Alistair?" Annoyance filled Isolde's face and voice. "Of all the... why are you here?"

Teagan stepped between them. "They are Grey Wardens, Isolde" His voice was patient as he tried to reassure her. "I owe them my life."

She nodded slowly. "Pardon me. I... I would exchange pleasantries, but..." She looked back at the castle. "Considering the circumstances..."

"Please, Isolde..." Teagan said. "We had no idea anyone was even alive within the castle. We must have some answers!"

Isolde wrung her hands. "I know you need more of an explanation, but I... don't know what is safe to tell. Teagan, there is a terrible evil within the castle. The dead waken and hunt the living. The mage responsible was caught, but still it continues." She sighed. "And I think... Conner is going mad. We have survived but he won't flee the castle." Tears began to fall from her eyes. "He has seen so much death! You must help him, Teagan! You are his uncle. You could reason with him. I do not know what else to do!"

"Do you think this 'evil' could be some kind of demon?" Lenore asked.

Isolde went pale. "I... I do not know. Oh, Maker's mercy! Could it truly be a demon?" She wrapped her arms around herself. "I can't let it hurt my Conner! You must come back with me, Teagan! Please!"

Saitada glanced at Lenore. The mage gave her a slight nod. "Tell me about this mage you mentioned," Saitada said.

"He is an..." Isolde hesitated just slightly. "Infiltrator, I think - one of the castle staff. We discovered he was poisoning my

husband. That is why Eamon fell ill."

Teagan blinked. "Eamon was poisoned?"

Isolde's voice was bitter. "He claims an agent of Teyrn Loghain's hired him. He may be lying, however, I cannot say."

"So why must Teagan go alone?" Saitada asked. The mage was likely not lying, but she was sure Isolde was. Or at least that she was concealing something.

Isolde was clearly growing desperate. "For Connor's sake, I promised I would return quickly and only with Teagan."

"Promised?" Teagan asked. "Whom did you promise?"

"Something the mage unleashed. So far it allowed Eamon, Connor, and myself to live." She shuddered. "The others... were not so fortunate. It's killed so many, and turned their bodies into walking nightmares! Once it was done with the castle, it struck the village! It wants us to live, but I do not know why. It allowed me to come for you, Teagan, because I begged, because I said Connor needed help."

Saitada looked back at Lenore. The mage's face was grim as she gripped her staff. She met Saitada's eyes, and gave her another nod. Saitada returned it. "Enough questions. We need to decide what to do." Saitada turned back to Teagan.

He met her eyes. "The king is dead, and we need my brother now more than ever. I will return to the castle with you,

Isolde."

The woman nearly collapsed with relief. "Oh, thank the Maker! Bless you, Teagan! Bless you!"

"It seems you have little choice," Saitada said.

He nodded. "I have no illusions of dealing with this evil alone. You, on the other hand, have proven quite formidable." He looked at Isolde. "Isolde, can you excuse us for a moment? We must confer in private before I return to the castle with you."

"Please do not take too long! I will be by the bridge." She gave him one more desperate look.

Teagan ushered them to the windmill. "Here's what I propose: I go in with Isolde and you enter the castle using the secret passage." He yanked the ring off his finger and offered it to Saitada. "My signet ring unlocks the door." She took the ring from him. "Perhaps I will... distract whatever evil is inside and increase your chances of getting in unnoticed. What do you say?"

"I can't let you do this. It's insane."

"What choice do either of us have? If your business with Eamon is important, you're going to have to go inside to find him."

"He's right," Alistair said. "Without Arl Eamon, we'll never get

the support we need."

"Ser Perth and his men can watch for danger at the castle entrance. If you can open the gates from within, they can move in and help you." He sighed. "I don't think there's anyone else who can help you. If you choose not to go, then it's up to me to do what I can." He sighed. "Whatever you do, Eamon is the priority here. If you have to, just get him out of there. Isolde, me, and anyone else... we're expendable."

Stone, the bloody man did remind her of Gorim. "I understand. We'll do our best."

"You're a good woman. The Maker smiled on me indeed when He sent you to Redcliffe."

Leliana shook her head. "So we are just going to send him off with that woman? It seems so dangerous!"

"One fool plan on top of another," Sten said.

"I can delay no longer. Allow me to bid you farewell... and good luck."

Saitada watched him follow Isolde. "Let's go people. The day still needs saving." As they went into the windmill, she held up a hand to slow Jerath. "Protect Alistair," she whispered. "If we lose Eamon, we're going to need him."

He nodded. She was halfway down the corridor before it occurred to her he didn't ask why.

#

"Demons?"

"This mage could have summoned one," Lenore said. "Or thinned the veil enough that some could cross over and take the bodies of the dead."

"Oh. Wonderful." Saitada sighed. "How do we fix it?"

"Kill it," Lenore said.

"That would be the simplest course of action," Morrigan said. "And the most likely to succeed."

"Alright," Saitada said. "You heard them folks. Let's go kill a demon."

#

They encountered the first corpses in what looked to be a storage room. After fighting so many above, these few were little challenge. The next door took them into what was clearly a dungeon. Lenore was looking around for signs of magic when she heard a familiar voice yell, "Get away from me!"

Ahead, several of the corpses were clawing at a door. Before the warriors could close, Lenore summoned fire and threw it into the midst of the dead. From the cell came the familiar voice again. "Hello? Is there someone out there? Who is it?" Lenore shoved past the others. "By all that's holy..." There he was, staring at her. "You! I can't believe it..."

"Jowan?"

He leaned on the cell door. "Maker's breath! How did you get here? I never thought I'd see you again, of all people."

She looked at him. He was bruised and battered, and pale beneath the dirt and blood on his face. "Jowan... what have they done to you?"

"What they'd do to all traitors, and would-be assassins." He hung his head. "I wouldn't be surprised if they sent you to finish me off."

Her hand went to her mouth, and she shook her head in disbelief. "You poisoned the arl?"

"You didn't know? I thought they told you. Unless you haven't spoken to them..."

"Lenore?" Saitada asked.

"This is Jowan," Lenore said, looking back at her. "He's my friend."

"And he's the mage Isolde mentioned?"

"Please," Jowan said. "I know how it seems. Poisoning the arl was... a terrible thing. But I'm not behind everything else happening here, I swear!" He shook his head, and looked back at Lenore. "Before I say anything else, I need to ask you a question. You can do whatever you feel you need to afterward, but I need to know..." He sighed. "What became of

Lily? They didn't hurt her, did they? The thought that she might have paid for my crime..."

"The Chantry sent her away. I don't know where."

"Oh my poor Lily." His voice was devastated. "She must hate me now, if she even lives. What have I done?" He sighed.

"What happens now?"

"How did you even end up here, involved in this?"

"I... I know it looks suspicious, but I'm not responsible for the creatures and the killings in the castle. I was already imprisoned when all that began." He sighed. "At first, Lady Isolde came here with her men demanding I reverse what I'd done. I thought she meant my poisoning of the arl. That's the first I heard about the walking corpses. She thought I'd summoned a demon to torment her family and destroy Redcliffe." He leaned on the wall. "She... had me tortured. There was nothing I could do or say that would appease her. So they... left me to rot."

"Why did you poison Arl Eamon?" Saitada asked.

"I was instructed to by Teyrn Loghain." He looked at her. "I was told that Arl Eamon was a threat to Ferelden, that if I dealt with him Loghain would settle matters with the Circle." He gave Lenore a hopeless look. "All I wanted was to be able to return." He shook his head. "But he abandoned me here, didn't he? Everything's fallen apart. I never thought it would end like this! Maker, I've made so many mistakes. I

disappointed so many people...I wish I could go back and fix it. I just want to make everything right again."

Lenore reached through the bars to put a hand on his arm. "That's good to hear you say."

"Well..." He covered her hand with his. "It's a start, maybe. I don't know if anything I do could ever make it right."

Saitada frowned. "So the teyrn hired you to posion Arl Eamon."

"Connor had started to show... signs. Lady Isolde was terrified the Circle of Magi would take him away for training."

"Connor?" Alistair's face revealed his shock. "A mage? I can't believe it!"

Jowan nodded. "She sought an apostate, a mage outside the Circle, to teach her son in secret so he could learn to hide his talent. Her husband had no idea."

"Perhaps her son is responsible for what happened," Lenore said, looking back at Saitada.

"I thought that, too," Jowan said. "Connor has little knowledge of magic, but he may have done something to tear open the Veil." He frowned uncertainly. "With the Veil to the Fade torn, spirits and demons could infiltrate the castle. Powerful ones could kill and create those walking corpses."

"I see," Saitada said. "I think I understand."

Jowan hung his head again. "The arl's a decent man. I wondered how he could possibly be the threat Loghian said he was, but I did it anyway. I'm such a fool."

"Yes, you are," Lenore said, touching her forehead to his.

"I'm just sick of running away and hiding from what I've done. I'm going to try to fix it, any way I can." He looked at her. "We were friends once. I know I don't deserve to call you that, after what I did... if it ever meant anything, please... help me fix this."

"So how will you make things right?"

"I'd... well, I'd try to save anyone still up there. There must be something I can do."

Lenore looked back at the rest of them. "So if I were to just let you go...?"

"I'd stay and try to help, if I could. Perhaps I can help deal with whatever's been unleashed here."

Lenore nodded. "I'm letting you out of your cell."

"Lenore..."

"He's my friend," Lenore said, turning to meet Saitada's eyes. "He was tricked just like everyone else. He's..." She looked back at Jowan. "He's family." She opened the door, then her hands glowed white as she cast a healing spell. "Escape." She said, putting her hands on his shoulders. "This is your last

chance."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not leaving. I made a mistake and I'm going to find some way to fix it."

"Please, Jowan. Run."

He looked at her, then back at the others. Lenore saw them frown, but none interfered. "Then... then I'll go." He hugged her. "I'm sorry things ended this way. I..." He let her go almost reluctantly. "Hope to see you again one day, under better circumstances." He went down the tunnel, looking back over his shoulder once before continuing on.

"I really hope we don't end up regretting that," Alistair said.

#

Brosca crept through the castle a bit ahead of the others. He heard something move behind a door, and signaled to the others. Saitada nodded. Carefully, Brosca opened the door.

"Ahhh!" The young serving woman squealed. "Please don't hurt me!"

"Be silent!" Brosca hissed at her. "You are safe."

"I... I'm sorry; I'm so frightened! These monsters are everywhere!" She shook with terror. "My... my name's Valena, the arlessa's maid. Is she... all right? What happened to everyone?"

"Valena?" Saitada asked. "The smith's daughter?"

She nodded desperately. "You know my father? I want to go back to the village! Is there a way out of here?"

"There is a tunnel leading out in the dungeon."

"B-but the monsters..."

"We've killed most of them. It's safe," Brosca assured her.

She backed away, then nodded. "I'll find my way. I can run fast and I know the castle. Thank you!" She fled.

Cathiel glanced at her mabari. "Griffon, go protect her." The dog whuffed, then followed the woman out.

"Let's find a way to that gate, let the others in," Saitada said.

#

They made their way through the castle. The corpses of servant and soldier alike had risen, and were put back down by the blades of the wardens and their companions.

The scene in the great hall was disturbing. Teagan danced and cavorted like a jester to the laughter and applause of a boy. He turned his gaze to them as they entered. "So these are our visitors? The ones you told me about, Mother?" His voice was deep, with a curious echo to it. Saitada saw Lenore stiffen.

"Yes, Connor," Isolde sounded as though she were trying to hold back terror.

"And these are the ones who defeated my soldiers? The ones I sent to reclaim my village?"

"Yes."

The boy's voice became a whine. "And now it's staring at me! What is it, Mother? I can't see it well enough."

"This is a dwarf, Connor. You... you've seen dwarves before. We've had them here at the castle..."

Connor laughed. "Had them? For dinner, maybe. Looks like a tough chew, maybe in a nice stew. Shall I send it to the kitchen, Mother?"

"Connor, I beg you, don't hurt anyone!"

The boy's voice became lost and frightened. "M-Mother? What... what's happening? Where am I?"

Isolde straightened. "Oh, thank the Maker! Connor! Connor, can you hear me?"

"Get away from me, fool woman! You are beginning to bore me."

"He's possessed," Lenore said. "An abomination."

"Grey Warden... please don't hurt my son! He's not

responsible for what he does!"

"What did you do with Bann Teagan?" Brehan asked.

"Here I am!" Teagan's voice was mocking, almost clownish.

"Here am I." He laughed.

Connor chuckled. "I like him better this way. No more yelling; now he amuses me!"

Saitada gestured for the others to spread out a bit, and take positions. Isolde saw them move and started shaking her head desperately. "Connor didn't mean to do this! It was that mage, the one who poisoned Eamon - he started all this! He summoned this demon! Connor was just trying to help his father!"

"And made a deal with the demon to do so?" Morrigan shook her head. "Foolish child."

Connor actually looked indignant. "It was a fair deal! Father is alive, just as I wanted. Now it's my turn to sit on the throne and send out armies to conquer the world! Nobody tells me what to do anymore!"

"Nobody tells him what to do!" Teagan laughed. "Nobody! Ha-ha!"

"Quiet, uncle. I warned you what would happen if you kept shouting, didn't I? Yes I did." Connor folded his arms, his expression surly and belligerent. "But let's keep things civil."

He focused his gaze on Saitada as she walked towards him slowly. "This woman will have the audience she seeks. Tell us, woman... what have you come here for?"

"I came here to help, if I could." Saitada watched the others move in carefully.

Connor raised an amused eyebrow. "To help me? To help Father? To help yourself? Which?"

"To help the people you've terrorized."

"I was just having fun! Everyone else had fun too! ARE you having fun, Uncle?"

"Marmalade!" Teagan said.

"You see?" Connor laughed. "We're having fun. I think you're just trying to spoil things. What do you think, Mother?" He looked around, as if noting the others for the first time. "I think it's threatening me."

Isolde looked at Saitada desperately. "I... I don't think..."

Connor rounded on her and snarled. "Of course you don't. Ever since you sent the knights away, you do nothing but deprive me of my fun. Frankly, it's getting dull." His voice rose to a shout. "I crave excitement! And action! This woman spoiled my sport by saving that stupid village, and now she'll repay me!"

The guards charged, and the wardens met them. Teagan

came at Saitada, and Sten solved the matter by simply punching the man in the face before he could draw a sword, sending him flying to the ground in an unconscious heap. She struck a guard across the belly with the flat of her blade, and then slammed her shield into his face. Across the room, Jerath tumbled into the legs of the two men coming at him, tripping them both. Brosca slammed the hilts of his weapons into their heads as they fell.

"Lenore?" Saitada asked.

"If its blood magic controlling them, I think I can help," she replied.

Saitada nodded. "Start with Teagan. Leliana, Brosca, bind the others. Brehan, Alistair, Sten, guard the doors. Cathiel, please see to Isolde. Jerath, Morrigan, see if you can figure out where Connor went."

"Don't hurt him!" Isolde said as Cathiel guided her to a chair.

"They won't," Cathiel assured her.

Lenore knelt next to Teagan, and closed her eyes in concentration. After a few moments, he stirred and sat up.

"Teagan! Teagan, are you all right?" Isolde tried to stand up, and Cathiel blocked her from doing so.

"I am..." Teagan looked around as if slowly becoming aware of his surroundings. "Better now, I think. My mind is my own

again."

"Blessed Andraste! I would never have forgiven myself had you died, not after I brought you here. What a fool I am." Isolde looked at Saitada, and then outright shoved Cathiel out of the way to throw herself at the ground near where Saitada was kneeling. "Please! Connor's not responsible for this! There must be some way we can save him!"

"I'm not about to kill a child."

Teagan sighed, his face bleak. "I do not know if we can save him. Demons do not listen to reason."

"He is not always the demon you saw. Connor is still inside him, and sometimes he breaks through. Please, I just want to protect him!"

"Isn't that what started all this?" Teagan shook his head reproachfully. "You hired the mage to teach Connor in secret... to protect him."

"If they discovered Connor had magic, then they'd take him away. I thought if he learned just enough to hide it, then..."

Saitada looked at Lenore. "What are our options?"

"The boy did break through a bit," Lenore said. Her eyes went distant as she considered. "Maybe... if we can capture him, keep him contained for long enough, there may be a way. We could confront the demon in the fade."

"Explain?"

"There is a connection between the demon and Connor. If we can get into the Fade, we could kill the demon, and thus free Connor."

"You can do this?" Isolde turned her eyes beseechingly towards the mage.

"Not easily. To enter the Fade we need lyrium and many mages. I don't think I could do it with just Morrigan. We'd have to go to the Circle."

Saitada nodded. "Well, we were headed there next anyway."

#

They regrouped in the Chantry. Leliana helped Brosca negotiate for supplies, trading away most of Lenore's elfroot potions for things like arrows. Brehan briefly admired a battleaxe, only to find the blacksmith practically pressing it into his hands. It was a well-balanced piece. He left the blacksmith with the sword he'd used earlier.

He noted Jerath talking with a boy and a young woman. Jerath handed the boy the green hilted sword he'd been using earlier, then closed the woman's hand over something. The boy held the sword to him proudly as he looked up at Jerath, eyes wide and almost worshipful.

An older woman looked at him and made a clucking sound. A

moment later he found a heavy, well-made green cloak being draped over his shoulders. "There. That will do to keep the weather off you a bit better than the rag you were wearing earlier."

"Mas serannas." She looked at him blankly. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't you be thanking me," she admonished him. She pointed over to where a soldier was sitting with a toddler in his lap. "My grandson still has his daddy because of you and yours." She cocked her head at him. "Your accent, and those marks. You're Dalish?"

"Yes."

A little girl looked up at him. "Really?"

He knelt down to her level. "Really."

"But you're nice! You saved us."

"Most Dalish are nice. We just don't usually like cities much."

"Are you 'lergic?" She looked up at him. "Daddy says he doesn't like cats much cause he's 'lergic."

Brehan laughed. "I suppose you could say that."

A few minutes later, he found himself surrounded by half the children in the Chantry as he wove the tale of Hesiria and her silver horned halla.

#

Teagan walked with them towards the edge of the village. "Maker forgive us. Connor is but a young boy, and this is happening to him only because he wished to help his father."

Lenore smiled at him reassuringly. "I've defeated demons in the fade before. We'll help him."

He nodded, then looked at Saitada. "The castle is under control for the moment, though I hear pockets of those creatures remain. For now, my main concern is ensuring that Eamon lives and Connor remains..." He sighed. "Where he is." He glanced towards Morrigan and Jerath. "I am not certain what keeps him there, but he will not stay there for long. Just do what you intend to do quickly."

Saitada nodded. "It's three days to the Circle, and three days back. Hopefully, Morrigan's spell will last the week."

He turned to Alistair, and put a hand on the man's shoulder. "Maker go with you." He looked them over. "All of you." He turned, and walked back to the village.

30. Chapter 30

The sun was high on the second day when a woman ran out of the bushes towards them. "Oh, thank the Maker! We need help! They attacked the wagon; please, help us!" She gestured. "Follow me! I'll take you to them!"

She ran off before Saitada could respond. "Brehan, Brosca, Leliana, stick to the woods and circle left. Jerath, Morrigan, Cathiel, circle right. The rest of you, with me." She headed in the direction the woman had gone.

They had almost reached the caravan when the 'bodies' began to rise from the ground, pulling out weapons. An elf with a strange accent held up a blade. "The Grey Wardens die here!"

From the left and right came arrows, and a few spells from Morrigan. Lenore tossed a fireball into a group of enemy archers with an almost bored expression on her face. Saitada heard a scream, and noted Jerath had handled the other group of archers.

"Careful now," Brosca called out. "They were competent enough to set some traps. Gimme a moment." He came around the wagon, and began pulling up the metal traps. Leliana and Cathiel started to assist.

Griffon let out a woof. He appeared to be sitting on the elven assassin. Saitada walked over. An arrow had taken the man in the shoulder, but he appeared to still be breathing. "Bind him. Might as well see who hired these buffoons."

"Mmm... what?" he said as Lenore healed him back to consciousness. "I..." He looked up at her. "Oh." He sighed. "I rather thought I would wake up dead. Or not wake up at all, as the case may be. But I see you haven't killed me yet." His accent was somewhat hard for Saitada to follow. She stepped back to let Brosca handle the matter. Brehan and Cathiel were already salvaging what supplies they could from the wagon. Jerath and Morrigan remained at their vantage point, keeping an eye out. Leliana was watching the interrogation, and Sten just looked annoyed by the delay. She couldn't blame him.

"We have some questions," Lenore said.

"Ah!" He shrugged. "So I'm to be interrogated. Let me save you some time." He smiled at her. "My name is Zevran. Zev to my friends. I am a member of the Antivan Crows, brought here for the sole purpose of slaying any surviving Grey Wardens. Which I have failed at, sadly." He shrugged again.

"Who hired you to kill us?" Brosca asked as he examined one of the traps. He fiddled with it a bit, then shook his head and just looked annoyed.

"A rather taciturn fellow in the capital. Loghain, I think his name was? Yes, that's it."

"Does that mean you're loyal to Loghain?" Saitada asked.

"I have no idea what his issues are with you." Zevran sounded completely indifferent. "The usual, I imagine. You threaten his power, yes?" He shrugged again. "Beyond that, no, I'm not loyal to him. I was contracted to perform a service."

"And now that you've failed that service?" Brosca asked. He tinkered with the trap a bit more, and it finally snapped shut. He put it in his pack.

"Well, that's between Loghain and the Crows." His voice became amused. "And between the Crows and myself."

"And between you and us?" Brosca asked.

"Isn't that what we're establishing now?"

"I think that's all we needed to know." Lenore glanced at Saitada, who just shrugged tiredly.

"Then unless you're quite stuck on cutting my throat or something equally gruesome, perhaps you'd care to hear a proposal?"

"I'm listening," Brosca said. "Make it quick." He began using his dagger to clean out from under his nails.

"Well, here's the thing. I failed to kill you, so my life is forfeit. That's how it works. If you don't kill me, the Crows will. Thing is, I like living. And you are obviously the sort to give the Crows pause. So let me serve you, instead."

"What do you want in return?" Lenore asked, her tone frankly amused by the entire situation. She looked over at Brosca.

"Well... let's see. Being allowed to live would be nice, and would make me marginally more useful to you. And somewhere down the line if you should decide that you no longer have need of me, then I go my way. Until then, I am yours. Is that fair?"

"Very well. I accept your offer," Brosca said.

Saitada turned back around and just stared at him. He shrugged. Zevran smiled at Brosca cut the ropes that bound him. "Thank you, my lord. You won't regret this." He stood up. "I hereby pledge my oath of loyalty to you, until such a time as you choose to release me from it. I am your man, without reservation... this I swear."

"Great," Saitada muttered.

#

"Are you insane?"

"You're worried about our new elf?" Brosca asked Saitada.

"I'm worried about our new assassin."

"He becomes a problem, I'll put him down," Brosca said "We need all the help we can get."

Saitada sighed. "He's your problem."

"That's what you told Brehan about Leliana, and she seems to be working out alright."

"She didn't try to kill us."

"You call that little fiasco an attempt to kill us?" Brosca laughed. "Boss, you've got low standards. Alistair's attempt to cook dinner came closer to killing us than that."

Saitada laughed. "You may have a point."

#

"So will you tell me now why you were caged?"

Sten looked down at her. "I caged myself. A weak mind is a deadly foe, as you are no doubt aware."

"Are you saying you put yourself in that cage?" Saitada asked.

"I know that my failures were my own. I told you before that I was sent here. I was not sent alone. I came to your lands with seven of the Beresaad - my brothers - to seek answers about the Blight. We made our way across the Fereldan countryside without incident, seeing nothing of the threat we were sent to observe. Until the night we camped by Lake Calenhad." He looked into the fire. "They came from everywhere: The earth beneath our feet, the air above us, our own shadows harbored the darkspawn. I saw the last of the creatures cut down, too late. I fell."

"That sounds like what happened to me at Ostagar."

He gave her a sympathetic look. "I heard the stories of Ostagar. Your kith stood their ground when others fled. No one can do more than that." He looked back to the fire. "I don't know how long I lay on the battlefield among the dead, nor do I know how the farmers found me. I only know that when I woke, I was no longer among my brothers. And my sword was gone from my hand."

"What did you do?"

"I searched for it. And when that failed, I asked my rescuers what had become of it."

"And then?" She knew the answer already, but wanted to get a better measure of the strange man.

A slight trace of regret entered his voice. "I killed them. With my bare hands." He looked at her. "I did. I knew they didn't have the blade. They had no reason to lie to me. I panicked. Unthinking, I struck them down."

"That's terrible."

"I know. I cannot justify what I have done. My honor is forfeit. That sword was made for my hand alone. I have carried it from the day I was set into the Beresaad. I was to die wielding it for my people. Even if I could cross Ferelden and Tevinter unarmed and alone to bring my report to the arishok, I would be slain on sight by the antaam. They would know me

as soulless, a deserter. No soldier would cast aside his blade while he drew breath."

She sighed. After a few minutes, she asked, "couldn't you search for it?"

"If I knew where to look, it would be in my hand now."

"You said you fought the darkspawn near Lake Calenhad. I believe that is where we are heading. Don't worry. We'll find it."

He looked towards her. "Perhaps those words are empty, but... thank you all the same."

#

Jerath kept pace with Morrigan as they brought up the rear of the party. "Have you ever been hunted by the Chantry?"

She gave a low laugh. "You are very cute to ask such questions."

He shook his head. "And you are cute when you're evasive."

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps we should be wrapped in ribbons and adorned with flowers, so cute are we two." She laughed again. "My mother has been hunted from time to time, yes. By Templar fools like Alistair, which should tell you how successful they generally were. Flemeth made a bit of a game of it, in fact. The Templars would come again and she would look at me and smile and say the fun was

about to begin once more."

"Fun? You found it fun?" He arched an eyebrow.

"I found the game fun. I was too young to understand the truth behind what was happening. Flemeth would warn them once. 'Twas a warning they inevitably failed to heed. And then the true game began. Often Flemeth would use me as bait. A little girl to scream and run and lure the Templars deeper into the Wilds and to their doom."

"Flemeth used you as bait?"

She smiled. "'Twas a game and I a young girl. If I didn't get to play, I would have been very upset. Thankfully, the Wilds is a vast place. Once they found us, Flemeth would simply move us elsewhere and we would be lost within the forest once again. I did not understand the danger we faced until I was much older. I had never heard of 'apostates' or 'maleficarum'."

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "They got what they deserved."

She looked over at him. "Perhaps they did. Still, I do not begrudge them doing what they believe is necessary. The Chantry sees any mages not leashed to the Circle of Magi as 'apostates.' And apostates could become 'maleficarum:' even mages that resort to blood magic and become demon-enslaved abominations. It may even be true. Still, those of us who prefer freedom see no reason to submit."

"I agree completely."

"Oh?" She gave him an odd look. "I hope you are not simply being agreeable. It would be a refreshing change."

"When I was young, there was a little girl. I still remember when the Templars came, her mother begging them not to take her child, pleading. One of the Templars struck the mother hard enough to break her skull. They dragged that little girl away while her mother was still convulsing on the ground, dying."

"Did no one in the alienage do anything?"

"They moaned. Wept. Wrung their hands. The usual." He touched his blade. "I was only five, then." He looked back at her. "Do you still think it was fun?"

"I think my mother made it fun so that a child did not learn to fear. And I think that it was necessary. There are no trials for apostates, no prisons, no mercy. There are only absolutes, so only survival matters. If the Wilds have taught me anything, 'tis this: first you must survive. Do you disagree?"

"You're probably right." He looked ahead towards the others. They were all out of earshot of the conversation. Probably for the best.

She gave a surprised chuckle. "An enlightened view. Or at least an agreeable one."

#

"What was life like in a Chantry... what's the word, cloister?" Brehan asked.

Leliana smiled. "Quiet. It was a life suited for contemplation. In the cloister, away from the fuss and flurry of the cities, I found peace. And in that stillness, I could hear the Maker. But it was not perfect. Some of my Chantry fellows were condescending. That is the nature of religious folk, I suppose."

"How so?"

"When I talked about my beliefs - that the Maker reveals Himself in the beauty of His world - they..." She sighed. "Treated me with disdain. They want to believe that He is gone, so that when He turns His gaze on them, it means they are special - chosen. He cannot possibly have love for all - the sick and weary, the beggars and the fools."

"I prefer your ideas to the ideas of the Chantry," he said. He still recalled the stares of the Chantry folk when they'd noted his vallaslin. The revered mother, at least, had accepted his offering with respect. Donating it, after the trouble it had nearly caused, had felt right.

Her eyes widened, and she smiled. "Thank you." She spread her hands. "Maybe I'm wrong, but it is the Maker's place to decide if I am worthy, not men. Not the Chantry." Her voice held a quiet conviction.

They walked in silence for a while. Brehan used his senses to scan from time to time, both to check for darkspawn and to

keep track of the others. They'd walked for nearly a half hour in companionable silence when Leliana gave him a contemplative look. "I must say that traveling with you has opened my eyes to how wrong some are about the Dalish. You are not at all savage. And I've not seen you snatch away women and children without provocation."

He blinked at her. "Are you trying to be funny?" he asked uncertainly.

"Funny? No, people actually do believe such things of you. If my people were more open to interacting with yours, we could do away with such mis-perceptions."

"The last time that happened, it didn't end well." He shrugged.

"I know humans and elves do not share a happy history, but peace must be possible." Her voice was earnest. "I hear many city folk talk about how wonderful it must be to live simpler lives, close to the earth. They could learn from the Dalish."

He frowned. "Do you think us a quaint curiosity meant for study?"

"I... I'm sorry. I did not mean it like that." She gave an embarrassed shake of her head. "I wasn't trying to belittle your culture. I have met very few elves and those I have met were... pledged to the service of Orlesian nobles."

"Slaves." He almost spat the word.

"They are serfs. There is no slavery in Orlais."

"It's the same thing."

"Elven servants are well-compensated for their services. Some of them live richer lives than humans. A well-trained elven servant is highly valued in Orlais. They are nimble and dextrous and many people find them pleasing to look at."

He stared at her. "Like a prize-winning animal?"

"No, I did not mean it that way!" She sighed. "My words were clumsily chosen. I did not mean to offend. I-" She made a vexed sound. "I am sorry."

"You may not be cruel," he said. "But you still see us differently." He started, slightly, then looked back at the others. Jerath was too far away for him to see, but he could sense the man. No wonder he'd been so hostile.

"I... I did not realize that. It is so strange, how long-held beliefs just seem natural and... right. Like there is no other way to feel. Thank you. You have given me a lot to think about."

The feeling was mutual. Brehan sighed. He owed Jerath an apology.

#

Saitada watched the scavenger for a moment. Then she shrugged and approached him.

"Back off!" he said when he saw her. "I was here first!"

"You haven't seen a sword lying around here, have you?"

"Why, you looking to buy one?"

"No, but my very large, angry friend here is," she gestured casually towards Sten.

"Ah... is he? Heh. Well... that's... see I'd like to sell you one, but I don't... er... have any myself." He frowned. "I got part of a glove that the wolves didn't chew too badly, though! I think it was a glove, anyway... I know. Don't say it. I got cheated." He sighed. "I knew the guy who was here before me. He sold me this spot. Said he'd found giants and all kinds of crazy valuables. He didn't mention he'd taken everything but the bones and dirt already. His name's Faryn. Squirrely little bastard, if you ask me. Which you didn't. But I said it anyway."

Saitada made a mental note of the name. "He found valuables here?"

"So he says. He didn't leave none of it here, I'll tell you. He was going to Orzammar, he said. I imagine he's gotten there by now." He grinned. "If you find him, tell him I sent you! It'll scare the piss out of him. Heh."

She nodded, and walked back to where Lenore seemed to be trying to negotiate them a boat.

#

"You! You're not looking to get across to the tower, are you? Because I have strict orders not to let anyone pass!" Carroll folded his arms and glared.

Lenore rubbed her head. Some things never changed. "I am a Grey Warden and I seek the assistance of the mages"

"Oh, you're a Grey Warden, are you? Prove it."

"Prove it?"

"Kill some darkspawn. Come on. Let's see some righteous Grey Wardening."

"There aren't any darkspawn here." She found herself wondering if the 'whatever it took to end a blight' part of being a Grey Warden would include lighting particular templars on fire.

"That's good, I suppose. Wouldn't want darkspawn smeared across the landscape. I hear their blood is black. Is that true? You'd know if you were a Grey Warden."

"It's not black, but it burns when it touches you."

"Oh, pleasant, eh? Good thing I don't have to kill them then. Anyway, it was nice chatting with you. Now on your way. Right now. Go."

She smiled. She knew his particular weak point well. "Your

superior won't like that you've given me trouble".

"Oh, really? You think Greagoir would be upset with me for not letting you in? Wait..." She could almost hear the gears trying to turn in his head. "Actually, he would. Good point."

"Well, we should try our best to avoid that, shouldn't we?"

"He's the big guy around here..." Lenore began to wonder if Carroll even actually recognized her as he prattled on. But then, it had never really been her face he'd looked at. "I bet he could deal with one Grey Warden. Alleged Grey Warden. Well, you want that i should take you there now?"

"Yes, please do."

"Come along, I suppose."

#

Lenore glanced back at Saitada as they approached the tower. Saitada gave her a nod and gestured for her to go ahead and take the lead. She took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Inside, templars were moving around, setting up barricades. Greagor stood in the center of the room, calling out orders. "...and I want two men stationed within sight of the doors at all times. Do not open the doors without my express consent. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ser," Matthias saluted.

Behind her, Alistair whispered, "the doors are barred. Are they keeping people out? Or in?"

"Now we wait, and pray." Greagoir shook his head. A templar touched his shoulder, and pointed to the wardens.

Lenore squared her shoulders and walked towards the Knight-Commander. "Greagoir. Good to see you again."

"Well, look who's back. A proper Grey Warden now, are we?" He actually gave her something vaguely resembling a smile. "Glad you're not dead."

"What's happening?" She looked around at the templars. She'd seen them drill before, but this... was definitely not a drill. "Why are the great doors barred?"

He sighed. "I shall speak plainly: The tower is no longer under our control. Abominations and demons stalk the tower's halls. We were too complacent. First Jowan, now this." He shook a finger at her. "Don't think I've forgotten your role in Jowan's escape."

"Jowan's escape seems small compared to the situation here."

"True enough." He leaned on the table. He looked tired, and for the first time since Lenore had met him, he actually looked old.

She looked around the room. A few mages huddled in a

corner, trying to stay out of the way of the templars. Her eyes narrowed. "What has become of the first enchanter?"

"We don't know." Frustration, and a hint of fear, filled Greagoir's voice. "We saw only demons, hunting templars and mages alike. I realized we could not defeat them and told my men to flee."

She looked over her shoulder at her companions. After what they'd done at Redcliffe, surely they could do something here. "What can I do to help?"

He blinked at her. "I have sent word to Denerim, calling for reinforcements and the Right of Annulment."

Her blood ran cold. "How can you think of annulling the entire Circle?"

"This situation is dire." He gave her a remorseful look. "There is no alternative - everything in the tower must be destroyed so it can be made safe again."

She shook her head. "The mages are not defenseless. Some must still live."

"If any are still alive, the Maker himself has shielded them. No one could have survived those monstrous creatures. It is too painful to hope for survivors and find... nothing."

Once again she looked around the room. It wasn't just mages in danger, she realized. Familiar faces were missing among

the templars. She scanned for one face in particular. He wasn't there. She looked back at Greagoir. "I'll look for survivors."

"I assure you, an abomination is a force to be reckoned with, and you will face more than one."

"I have confidence in our abilities." She looked back at her companions, drawing his attention to them.

"Ah, that arrogance hangs about you like some fell cloud, doesn't it?" She was surprised to hear pride in his voice. He sighed, then looked back at the others. He nodded. "If you succeed, I would owe you much, enough that I would pledge my templars to your cause. Without word from Denerim, I must determine our course. Surely destroying darkspawn is a worthy goal."

"We have an agreement, then."

"A word of caution... once you cross that threshold, there is no turning back. The great doors must remain barred. I will open them for no one until I have proof that it is safe. I will only believe it is over if the first enchanter stands before me and tells me it is so. If Irving has fallen... then the Circle is lost, and must be destroyed. May Andraste lend you her courage, whatever you decide."

#

Saitada raised an eyebrow as Lenore walked back over to

them. "Um... Lenore?"

Lenore's voice was flat. "Annulling the circle means killing everyone inside. All the mages." She shook her head. "Saitada, there are children in there."

"Well then, let's get started." Saitada gestured at the others. Under the watchful eyes of the templars, they followed Lenore into the tower.

#

Brehan looked back as the door closed behind them. Locked in a mage cage, about to face demons and abominations. He was almost starting to miss the darkspawn. He was mollified a bit to note that Morrigan and Sten also looked a bit nervous.

He put a hand on the hilt of the axe he'd picked up in Redcliffe, as much to reassure himself it was still there as anything else. Lenore walked ahead, Saitada a pace behind her. Brosca was watching the mage, his face betraying concern for his friend. Brehan glanced at one of the bodies laying on the ground, and realized that they were walking through Lenore's home.

This was not going to be pretty.

#

Ahead, there was a burst of magic. A small group of mages set their spells against a demon, while a group of children

cowered behind them. The eldest of the mages sent forth a burst of energy that seemed to dissolve the demon. She touched her head, then turned towards the children and saw them approaching. Her staff came up. "Stop right there! Take another step, and I swear I will strike you down where you stand!" She blinked. "You? You've returned to the tower? Why did the templars let you through? Are you here to warn us?"

Lenore held up her hands. "This was my home. I want to see what's happened to us."

Wynne nodded. "I see you still care about the Circle and our tower. Unfortunately, the Circle is in grave danger."

Lenore nodded. "From the templars. They intend to annul the Circle."

Wynne's shoulders sagged. "They have the Right of Annulment."

"No, but Greagoir expects it to arrive soon," Lenore walked towards her.

Wynne sighed in resignation. "So Greagoir thinks the Circle is beyond hope. He probably assumes we are all dead." She looked back at the children. "They abandoned us to our fate, but even trapped as we are, we have survived. If they invoke the Right, however, we will not be able to stand against them."

Lenore's hands tightened on her staff. "We waste time here

when there are abominations to kill."

"If you are here to kill abominations, let me help you." She gestured wearily at the door behind her. "I erected a barrier over the door leading to the rest of the tower, so nothing from inside could attack the children. You will not be able to enter the tower as long as the barrier holds, but I will dispel it if you join with me to save this Circle."

Lenore nodded. "We must try to avoid needless slaughter."

"Yes. Even if we cannot eliminate all the demons and abominations, together, we could lead the survivors out." Hope began to show in her eyes. "Once Greagoir sees we have made the tower safe, I trust he will tell his men to back down. He is not unreasonable."

"Will the children be safe here?" Saitada asked.

Wynne blinked as if noticing Lenore's companions for the first time. A hint of a smile began to show on her face as she looked them over. "Petra and Kinnon will watch them. If we slay all the fiends we encounter on our way, none will get by to threaten the children."

"Very well -" Lenore glanced at Saitada. "If you think that is best."

Morrigan shook her head. "You want us to assist this preachy schoolmistress? To rescue these pathetic excuses for mages? They allow themselves to be corralled like cattle,

mindless. Now their masters have chosen death for them and I say let them have it." Her voice was spiteful.

Lenore rounded on her. "Hold your tongue, you harpy!"

"You will do as I say," Saitada said.

Morrigan scoffed. "Have it your way," she said, waving a hand dismissively.

Wynne turned to the other mages. "Petra, Kinnon... look after the others. I will be back soon."

Petra gave her a worried look. "Wynne... are you sure you're alright? You were so badly hurt earlier. Maybe I should come along."

"The others need your protection more. I will be all right," Wynne said, gesturing at the wardens. She pointed to the children. "Stay here with them... keep them safe and calm."

A couple children were clinging to Griffon, and Cathiel instructed the hound to stay with the kids. He woofed, and began happily licking faces.

"Have faith." Lenore smiled at Petra. "We will not fail."

Wynne nodded at her. "Your confidence is refreshing, though you should make sure it does not blind you to your weakness." Morrigan rolled her eyes and made a rude sound. Wynne shot her an annoyed look. "If you are ready, let us go end this."

"Let's go," Saitada said.

#

Lenore looked over the barrier. It was surprisingly strong. She could perhaps have matched it, but not without effort. Wynne nodded at it. "Here we are. I am somewhat amazed at myself for having kept it in place this long."

"You did what you had to do, Wynne," Lenore said, giving her a respectful nod.

"It made me very weary at times, but I had to stay strong, to keep us safe. Be prepared for anything. I do not know what manner of beasts lurk beyond this barrier."

"Do not fear, my good lady," Zevran said, his voice almost cheerful. "Our Grey Wardens are very good at fending off attackers. Speaking from experience here."

"I wish to hurt him," Brehan said.

"Later," Saitada said, shooting the both a glare.

"We're ready. Destroy the barrier," Lenore said.

"All right. Be on your guard..." Wynne gestured, and the barrier fell in a burst of bright light.

31. Chapter 31

Brehan rolled out of the way of the attacking corpse. Jerath came to his aid, parrying the blow with his small axe before running it through with his sword. Leliana put two arrows in the next corpse, dropping it before it closed. Brehan got back to his feet, and put a hand to his side. His fingers came away wet with blood.

Wynne caught the motion. Her hands glowed white as she put them on either side of the wound. A moment later, the pain vanished. "Thanks."

"You know, you could learn how to dodge," Leliana teased.

"You mean, I'm not supposed to block swords with my torso?" Brehan blinked at her, eyes wide in mock surprise.

Brosca snorted. "Stop giving him ideas. He starts dodging, some of these things might decide to target the rest of us."

Brehan was about to reply when a door burst open and four creatures that appeared to be made out of living fire surged through, followed by still more of the corpses. "Fenedhis."

Jerath put himself between one rage demon and Morrigan. The mage gestured, and suddenly the blade of the sword was

coated in ice. He drove it into the demon, and it shrieked, swiping at him with sickle-like claws. He ducked, withdrew the blade, then stabbed again. This time, it seemed to melt into the floor. He moved on to the next.

Morrigan waved her staff again, and the oncoming corpses seemed to slow. Brehan and Sten surged forward, their greater reach of their weapons allowing them to finish off the corpses without disrupting the magic.

"The stories never mention the smell," Brehan said as he brought his axe down to finish off one of the creatures.

"I'm not sure if it makes a good story for the hero to lose his lunch from the scent," Leliana said, wrinkling her own nose.

Brehan looked around. Saitada and Alistair were locked into battle with one rage demon, while Cathiel peppered it with arrows. Jerath's icy blade had made short work of his second target. He looked around. He was sure he'd seen four enter the room.

The ground beneath Lenore erupted in flame, and the mage was sent tumbling as the demon shot out of the floor with an unearthly howl. Brosca leaped forward to prevent it from closing on the downed caster, and both Brehan and Sten closed. Each time the demon lunged at one, the other two attacked.

A moment later, it was over. "Everyone alright?" Saitada asked.

"Nothing damaged but my dignity," Lenore said. She and Wynne quickly moved to treat the minor scrapes and burns the others had suffered.

#

"I have a thought."

Jerath glanced up at Morrigan's quiet words. He noted she'd waited until the others were occupied and out of earshot.

"Oh? What's on your mind?"

"We have an opportunity that I believe we should take advantage of." She looked around, and then continued. "To the point: my mother was once divested of a particular grimoire by a most annoying templar hunter. It occurred long before I was born, but even today Flemeth speaks of the loss with great rage." She touched her foot to a broken statue.

"With the Circle of Magi in such disarray, it occurs to me that this might be the perfect time to recover the tome from their possession, for surely it eventually ended up in their hands."

The rage hummed an unnecessary warning. He raised an eyebrow, then nodded. "Very well. I'll keep an eye out for it."

She smiled. "Good. I am most interested to see its contents, should it be located. The grimoire is leather-bound and adorned with the symbol of a leafless tree, should you come across it. If not, however, then I shall simply put it out of my mind."

He was rather interested to see what the book had to say himself.

#

Brosca shuddered slightly as Wynne and Lenore tried to convince the stockkeeper to go back to safety. Lenore had told him a bit about these mages. Tranquil, she'd called them. Creepy, they were. Duncan had saved her from ending up like one of him. He touched the hilt of his mace. Any of those templars came near her, he was going to introduce them to a world of pain.

They at least managed to convince Owain to hide, and moved on. Lenore's reaction to the maleficarum was... well, it was a little scary. And he'd be lying if he said it wasn't just a little bit sexy to see her throwing fire out of each hand. Maybe that said something about him.

"Please, please don't kill me." The survivor of the blood mages was crawling backwards from them.

"The people you killed didn't want to die either," Lenore said, gesturing at the bodies strewn about the place.

"I know I have no right to ask for mercy, but I didn't mean for this death and destruction. We were just trying to free ourselves." She held her hands up weakly. "Uldred told us the Circle would support Loghain and Loghain would help us be free of the Chantry." She shook her head. "Don't you remember what it was like living here? The templars

watching... always watching."

Brosca blinked as Lenore went slightly pale. The woman's words had obviously hit home. He touched the hilt of his mace again. Lenore shook her head. "What you've done will make things worse for future mages."

"We thought... someone always had to take the first step... force a change, no matter the cost."

Wynne's voice was cold. "Nothing is worth what you've done to this place."

"And now Uldred's gone made, and we are scattered, doomed to die at the hands of those who seek to right our wrongs..."

"And all you can do is wallow in self-pity. Pathetic," Brosca muttered.

"What else can I do? I'm trapped here."

Lenore's hand twisted around her staff, and the gem set into it glowed. Then she turned, and walked away. After a moment, Wynne followed. Brosca shrugged, and started to walk away with the rest. Something made him glance over his shoulder. Jerath wiped blood off his blade as he stepped over the corpse and walked after them.

#

"Huh, another breathing cupboard," Brosca said.

Saitada looked at him, then rubbed her forehead. "Is someone in there?"

"N-no?" a voice replied.

Saitada raised an eyebrow. "It's safe. You can come out."

"Are the demons gone?" The voice was shaky. "Is it safe? I don't want to die."

"They're gone."

"If... if you're sure it's safe, I could take a peek outside." A mage in sweaty robes climbed out of the cupboard. "Oooh, ow. Ah... yes."

"Are you hurt?" Lenore asked.

"I have a crick in my back and my bum's gone numb. Oh, holy Maker..." He turned in a slow circle, surveying the remains of the abominations, demons, and corpses they'd left strewn about the room. "Those demons didn't know what hit them, did they?" He gave a polite bow. "Godwin, mage of the Circle of Ferelden, at your service."

"How did you end up in that closet?" Saitada asked.

"There were demons everywhere, blocking my exit. I decided the best thing to do in that situation was to in that situation was to hide and be very, very quiet." He sagged a little. "I just really want to be somewhere safe. I think I might stay here for now. Maybe go back into my closet for a little while."

"We've killed most of the demons. You could escape." Brehan stepped back and pointed at the door.

He gave Brehan a snide look. "And go where? The templars have locked the door. I'm just going to stay here and see what happens."

"Very well." Lenore rolled her eyes. "Take care."

He gave her a grateful look. "Thank you again, for saving me. May we meet again, in happier, less life-threatening times." He climbed back into the cupboard and shut the door behind him.

Lenore gave the cupboard a bemused look before turning to the others. "Shall we move on?"

"Please," Saitada said.

#

Saitada was starting to lose count of the number of demons they'd killed. The desire demon had been a little bit disturbing. Killing a man who thought he was defending his wife and children had not been an easy task. The few templars they'd encountered had been driven mad. They'd incapacitated where they could, but had been forced to kill.

"What about the abominations here?" she asked Lenore.

"These, the changed ones, they are lost to the demons inside them. Even if we could capture them, there is little left of who

they used to be."

"You knew some of them?" Brosca asked her.

Lenore glance back. "Nemia. She had the bunk above mine. Her brother is a templar, at a circle in the Free Marches. Starkhaven, I think." She sighed.

"Wycome," Wynne said.

"Yes. That's right."

"Sorry, Fireball."

"Me too." She shifted her grip on her staff. "I wish to do Uldred grievous bodily harm."

"I'll hold him for ya."

#

"Oh, look. Visitors." The demon shifted in place. It sounded as though every word had to be dragged out. "I'd entertain you but... too much effort involved."

"Killing demons is enough entertainment for me, thanks," Saitada said. She drew her sword.

"But why?" The demon blinked at them almost sleepily. "Aren't you tired of all the violence in this world? I know I am."

In the back of his mind, Jerath felt the rage start to beat. The

demon continued to drone on. "Wouldn't you like to just lay down and... forget about all this? Leave it all behind?"

The rage beat louder as Jerath felt something start to cloud his mind. Around him, his companions began to fall. He dimly heard Wynne say something about resisting before she joined the others on the ground. The demon looked at him, eyes boring into his own. "Why do you fight? You deserve more... You deserve a rest. The world will go on without you."

Silence.

#

A city hung, suspended in the distance, hanging out over nothing. He stood on what appeared to be part of a ruined city, drifting above the emptiness. Something rustled behind him, and he turned.

The features were his, but appeared carved out of stone so dark a green they were nearly black. Eyes of molten stone glowed as they stared at him. "I won't let it have you." The voice was his, but somehow more resonant. "Sloth. Despair. A scavenger, sniffing around the leavings of pride." The surface of the creature flowed, showing a hint of red fire beneath, like lava breaching a crust. "It will not keep what is mine."

Jerath closed his eyes for a moment. "You are the rage."

"Your rage. I had not thought we would ever meet this way, in

the fade."

"Are the others here as well?"

It shrugged. "They fell to despair. I brought you here." It clenched fists, and fire danced around them. "We will wake, and we will cut our way through the tower. Uldred will beg for death."

He laid a hand on the hilt of his sword. The metal was warm to the touch. The rage smiled. And Jerath closed his eyes. He inhaled, and then opened them to meet the pools of fire in that face shaped like his own. "No."

The rage flowed backwards. "No?"

"It drew them into the fade. That means they are here. I am going to find them. I am going to set them free."

"I am not giving you to the scavenger."

Jerath took a step towards it. "I will not let the... scavenger... have them." He narrowed his eyes. "They are mine."

"That was not our bargain."

"Your bargain was never with me."

"Wasn't it? The skills I have given you, the warrior I have made you..." It smiled. "The killer. Tell me, did you not enjoy tearing Vaughan's head from his shoulders?" It laughed. "You play. Handing out kindness here and there so you can pretend

you don't love the feel of your blade slicing flesh."

"And would you have us be one of those things haunting the tower? Mindless? Kill or be killed?" Jerath shook his head.

"We still have one left."

"He was in the royal guard. The darkspawn did that for us." Jerath narrowed his eyes. "The way that child looked... you felt it. The faith in her eyes. Like we could do anything." He shook his head. "I am going for them. And if necessary, I will go through you."

"You would fight me? You would fight yourself?"

"I fight you every day."

"You run from me every day. In the barn, you let that Dalish hit you. I could have..."

"Killed him? And then what? Killed the woman? Then Duncan, and the others?"

"Better than bargaining with her for their lives."

"And would you have that be for nothing? All of it, for nothing?" He touched his sword. "The duty that cannot be forsworn. Yes, I have killed. I will kill again. But not without purpose." He stared. "And I need them."

"Purpose."

"I am a Grey Warden."

The fire faded slowly from around its hands. It looked down at them, its expression odd. "We are a Grey Warden." He met Jerath's eyes. "I will take you to them." He started to turn, then looked back. "It will not be easy."

"If it was easy, someone else would do it."

#

Saitada found herself standing in a fortress of white stone. It felt comfortable. Like home. And yet... She looked up to see Duncan approaching, and smiled.

"Ah, there you are. I'm not disturbing you, am I?" He sat next to her on the marble bench, and put his arm around her.

She snuggled into him. "I can't quite remember what I was doing."

"I'm sure you were simply deep in thought. You've been at Weisshaupt for some time now. Do you like it here?"

"Yes, of course. It's a beautiful fortress."

"It will stand as a testament to the time when the Grey Wardens were needed to fight the darkspawn."

Saitada frowned, and pulled away from him. She shook her head. Something seemed off. "You speak as though the darkspawn are no longer a problem"

Duncan ran his fingers through her hair. "The darkspawn are gone, remember? You were there in that last great battle. It was a triumph for all of us, bringing down the archdemon and setting the underground lairs ablaze."

"If the darkspawn are gone, then we are no longer needed..." She stood, and shook her head slightly.

"The Grey Wardens shall be keepers of history. We shall tell tales and sing songs of a more tumultuous time, that others may rejoice in knowing that time is past." He held out his hand to her.

She started to take it when she heard footsteps. She turned. The elf... he looked familiar. Like she should know his name. He looked, ragged, with torn armor. In his hands were mismatched daggers instead of the axe and sword he... how did she know what weapons he preferred? There were scorch marks on his left leg, and he was bleeding. "Funny," he said. "Did Duncan ever strike you as a man who would rest on his laurels?"

"That's not... I..." She looked at Duncan.

Duncan stood and put a hand on her shoulder. He gave her a loving look. "The Duncan you know was a man forged in the fires of war. I am different now, at peace. I have learned to be tranquil."

"Duncan is dead, Saitada. That's not Duncan."

"Dead? Me? Hah! I have been close many times, but I never quite made it all the way." He shrugged.

Saitada turned to the elf. "Who are you?"

He walked towards her slowly. "The world is never utterly at peace, Saitada."

"But now it is, for the first time in history. And you played a part in the making of that history." Duncan caressed her cheek. "Do you not remember?"

"Vaguely..." She tried to call up the memories, but they slipped from her grasp. "As though it were a dream."

"This is the dream, Saitada. You are the commander. We looked to you, when Duncan died. We need you now."

"No... that's not... you don't need..." Stone wrapped around her heart. She stared at the elf, unwilling to look at the man next to her. "It's not Duncan, is it?"

"Foolish child. I have given you so much and you cast it back in my face. Can you not be content with the peace I offer?"

She didn't look at him. "You offer complacency, not peace."

"It seems only war and death will satisfy you. So be it! Have your war and your darkspawn! May they be your doom!"

Two other wardens turned and began firing arrows at them as Duncan drew his blade. She brought up her shield to block.

Jerath flung one of the daggers into the throat of an archer before turning to attack the other. Saitada blocked two more of Duncan's blows before she could bring herself to use the sword. She cried out as the blade did its cruel work.

She lowered her sword, and brushed a hand across her eyes, wiping tears away. Jerath turned away for a moment, pretending to look around as she regained her composure. "This is the Fade." She said, her voice coming out strangely harsh as she turned away from what refused to stop looking like Duncan's corpse.

Jerath nodded. "It stands to reason the others are trapped here as well. These things, here, they seem to function like some sort of portal. I touched one, after... ended up fighting another demon. That seemed to open up another of these things, and that one brought me here."

"This one...it appeared when I killed..."

"It's not him, Saitada."

"We'd won. There were no more darkspawn, anywhere. I know it wasn't real, but for a moment... I wanted to believe it so badly." She shook herself, then looked him over. "You are injured."

"I'll be fi..." he was interrupted as something shrieked in the distance. "Maybe we should get moving." He moved to the portal.

She started to follow, but the world got fuzzy around her.
"Jerath?" Darkness.

#

He stepped back into the library. The other version of him was waiting. "Well?"

"Where'd she go?"

"She's free. She's on her way now, crossing the threshold. From her perspective, only a heartbeat will pass. Assuming, of course, you don't manage to get yourself killed."

"Where to now?"

"Well, now we've got to get this door open."

"How do I..." Jerath followed the other's eyes to a mouse hole. "If you are the demon, how come I have to do the shapeshifting?"

"Because it's your perception that bends."

Jerath sighed, and changed.

#

Brehan jumped the fallen log and scrambled up the short incline before ducking behind a tree. He held his breath and waited for the darkspawn to pass. Tamlen crouched behind a rock, his eyes wide as he carefully knocked an arrow.

Between the trees, Brehan could make out the landships fleeing to safety.

A twig snapped, and both elves whirled, firing arrows at the sound. An elf in battered armor dodged Tamlen's arrow, but Brehan's scraped his arm, eliciting a hiss of pain. Brehan lowered his bow. "Easy, Lethallan" he said to Tamlen. "That's not a darkspawn."

"It's a flat-ear!" Tamlen responded. "Almost the same thing"

Brehan frowned.

"Doesn't sound like something Tamlen would say, does it?" the newcomer asked.

"Who are you? Another flat ear come to seek the Dalish?" Brehan called out. "If so, you are far too late." He looked back towards the escaping landships, and the other elf followed his gaze.

Jerath frowned. "It's not real, Brehan."

"How can you say that!" Brehan shouted. "My clan... they are safe."

"They are not safe. Not yet. The darkspawn are still coming. You left to keep them safe."

"I... I wouldn't leave my clan."

"Do you remember the mirror, Brehan? Duncan saving you?"

"Duncan... the Grey Warden..." Brehan shook his head, trying to make sense of the conflicting memories. "You... Where were you when this happened?! The darkspawn came and you wardens were nowhere to be found!"

"How did you know I am a warden?"

"I..."

"We took our joining together, Brehan. It saved your life."

"Lethallan... kill this flat-ear. We must protect our clan."

Slowly, Brehan turned. "Go, Tamlen."

"What?"

"Please. Please just go. I don't want... I don't want to see you die. I just... please... go. You aren't real."

Slowly, the forest began to fade. Brehan turned to Jerath, his eyes bleak. "I... I shot you."

"Fortunately, your aim is terrible."

Brehan gave a bitter laugh, then his vision began to blur.

"What the..." Darkness.

#

"He shot me. Ass." Jerath bandaged his arm.

"You could have left him," it said.

"No."

"Oh, look. Darkspawn."

They fought back to back as the waves of darkspawn came. Their movements complimented each other as though they'd been doing it for years. But then, they had.

"Here," it said, calling his attention to something. "Another of the fonts."

Jerath touched it, and felt the energy rush into him. His skin glowed briefly. He felt stronger than he had just a few moments before. "What are these, anyway?"

"If we stood here a month, I might be able to get you to grasp the basics." It held out its arm, seemingly pleased by the results of the font.

"Some other time. Who is next?"

"Let's find out."

#

Lenore giggled as Cullen nibbled at her ear. "Stop that", she said coyly.

"I can't help it. Your ears are so tasty. It must be magic."

"I have work to do... There was something..."

"My love, let the apprentices handle whatever needs to be done. It's our wedding day, let us keep this time to ourselves."

"I thought mages weren't allowed to marry," a voice interrupted.

Lenore turned, startled. An elf was standing on the roof. He looked... familiar... and half dead. "Oh dear. You must be looking for the healer rooms."

"And I'm fairly certain relationships between Templars and mages are frowned upon," he continued.

"That's not..." Lenore frowned.

"Things have changed, elf, since my lovely wife became the First Enchanter."

Jerath ignored Cullen, keeping his attention on Lenore. "Do you remember why you left the tower, Lenore?"

"We... to fight the darkspawn."

"And fight them you did. After you killed the archdemon, Irving stepped down so you could take his place, love. Don't you remember?"

"Yes. I remember."

"He is obviously confused." Cullen added. "Perhaps his mind is

addled."

She turned back to the elf. "Come, let me heal you, and perhaps we can see about getting you a meal."

"Be careful, love. He could be dangerous." Cullen stepped in front of her. "You there, put down your weapons, and we will see to it you get healing."

The elf frowned. "Lenore, we really don't have time for this. I have no way of knowing how much time has actually passed. Please, you have to remember. Do you remember finding Jowan, in Redcliff?"

"Jowan..."

"Your old friend." Cullen mentioned. "Didn't he get married, recently?"

"Yes, to Lily. I... remember..."

"He was a blood mage, Lenore."

"How dare you!" Lenore drew herself up. "Jowan would never..." she bit her lip.

Cullen put a hand on his blade. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave now, knife-ear!" He took a menacing step forward.

Jerath drew his daggers. "Lenore, listen to me... this is the fade. This is a dream. This Templar here, he is a demon, a shade..."

Lenore shook her head wildly. Cullen drew his blade and stepped towards Jerath. "That is enough from you, elf. She is mine!"

Jerath caught the swing with crossed daggers and redirected it to the side. As Cullen's momentum took him past, the elf kicked the Templar in the side of the knee, sending the larger man to the ground in a groan of pain. Jerath stepped in for a follow-up blow, and Lenore caught him in a spell. Bars of magic held the elf in place as he shuddered in agony. "LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lenore shouted.

"Lenore..." Jerath gasped. "Remember... we need..."

Lenore began another spell as Cullen stood up, a triumphant smile on his face.

"Connor..." Jerath managed to say.

"I... Connor..."

"Finish him, my love." Cullen's voice...but not... Not Cullen. She redirected her spell, hitting the Templar with a blast of fire that drove him off the side of the tower. The spell holding Jerath collapsed, as did the elf.

"Jerath, oh, Jerath. Maker, I'm sorry." She started to weave a healing spell, but her vision began to blur. "Maker, what's happening..." Darkness.

It took Jerath a minute to stand up. "Lenore packs a hell of a punch."

"Mages cheat."

"If we live, I think I'll ask Alistair to teach me some of those templar tricks."

"You noticed Wynne, right?"

"Yeah. Thoughts?"

"Faith. It's faith." Its voice was contemplative. "It's not controlling her. Just keeping her alive. It's weak though. Couldn't protect her from Sloth." It cocked its head to the side. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Sympathize. And keep an eye on her."

#

Brosca was still staring at the mug in his hand when the elf sat down across from him at the table. He pushed the pitcher towards the elf, and then glanced over to where his mother was laughing at a joke Rica told. "Funny."

"What is?"

"They can make my mother sober enough to string two words together, but the ale still tastes like mold."

"Figured it out already, have you."

"Yeah... ain't real. Still... ain't seen them laugh like that since I was a wee one." He took a drink, made a face, and then looked over at the elf. "Heh... you look like something a nug wouldn't eat. What the hell happened to you?"

"Brehan shot me."

"Your dream or his?"

"His."

"Figures." He took another drink. "So what now?"

"We've still got a fight ahead."

"Yeah. Suppose it's time to go then." He looked over at the giggling women, and then finished his drink. "Ain't gonna bother paying the tab. Let's go." As he turned to walk to the door, his vision started to blur. He kept walking until the darkness took him.

#

"That settles it." Jerath began looking around the new chamber. Books floated everywhere. "Brosca is my favorite."

"If you die, I'm thinking of taking him over."

"I would have thought Brehan. He's got a temper."

"He punched us in the face. And shot you."

"True. He might be crazy."

"I will point out that he isn't the one walking through the fade talking to a manifestation of his inner self."

"I'm starting to understand why he shot me."

They found themselves facing another of the massive doors. Jerath couldn't quite hide a smile as he shifted into the form of the large golem. It was kind of nice being the biggest thing in the room.

#

The sensation of having his skin on fire and not actually burning was very odd. Warmth seemed to trickle pleasantly through his veins, providing a counter to the pain.

He shifted his form back, and then looked at his companion. He raised an eyebrow. "The fire hurt you."

"A little," the other said.

"I thought rage demons couldn't burn."

"And I told you that your perception bends the fade. Did you think that limited to just our surroundings and yourself?"

Jerath blinked. "What does that mean?"

"It means... that we have a purpose. One left. Once she's free, it will shatter. You will face the one that made this

place." It looked at Jerath. "I can't help you anymore."

"I can get through the rest."

"I'm not just talking about here."

Jerath froze. He met its eyes. "I thought..."

"The bargain was with the demon." It looked down at its hands. Light still shown through cracks, but it was green, almost soothing. "I... am not a demon."

He felt a lump in his throat, and nodded. "You'll be alright?"

"I think I will." It smiled. "Go."

He nodded, and turned to the last portal.

#

"... and there was poor Ser Garlan, with no weapon to be had but a dinner fork!"

Cathiel laughed as Fergus finished the tale. Her father pounded the table as her mother gave an exasperated sigh, one that didn't quite hide the smile playing on her own lips. Across the table, Oriana rolled her eyes and cooed at the infant in her arms. Oren sat next to her, feeding bits of vegetables to Griffon whenever his mother was distracted by the infant. Behind her father, she saw the door of the hall open, and an elf slip inside. She would have thought him a servant, but he was armed and armored, and bleeding. Her

mother followed her gaze, and her eyes widened as she too, noticed the newcomer. The table fell silent as one by one they turned to face the elf.

"Young man..." her father started to speak. "Young man, if you are looking for Mother Mallol, you are in the wrong place." He gestured for one of the guards.

The elf shook his head. "I'm looking for your daughter, Cathiel Cousland."

Cathiel frowned. "And why are you looking for me, elf?"

"This isn't real, Cathiel."

"What are you talking about?" She frowned. "Of course this is real."

"Do you remember the night you were conscripted?"

"I..."

Her father stood up. "Young man, I would never allow my daughter to be conscripted, no matter what so-called rights the Grey Wardens invoke!"

"Remember, Cathiel."

Cathiel shook her head. Her father gestured for the guards. "Get rid of him."

Wounded or no, the elf was fast. He took the two guards

nearest him before they'd finished drawing their weapons. The third and fourth fared no better. Ser Gilmore caught the elf with the edge of a shield, but he recovered quickly, parrying Ser Gilmore's blow and stepping in to bury his dagger into Ser Gilmore's chest.

Cathiel screamed, "Rory", as the arrow buried itself in the elf's chest. He collapsed to his knees, and she was shocked to see the bow in her hands.

"It's not... Cathiel, it's not real."

Cathiel leaped over the table, bow in her hands, and stalked towards the elf. He struggled to his feet as she slammed him against the wall. "You killed Rory."

The elf winced. "No... Arl Howe did."

Cathiel's hands began to tremble. "No..."

"He's still out there, Cathiel. Your family is in their graves, with none to avenge them but you." Blood trickled from the side of the elf's mouth.

Cathiel let out a sob. "Maker... Jerath...there has to be some poultices around here, somewhere..." she released him, and started to move towards the cabinet as her vision began to blur. Darkness.

#

The demon flowed around the center of the small valley.

"What do we have here? A rebellious minion? And escaped slave?" It laughed. "My, my... but you do have some gall. But playtime is over. You all have to go back now."

Saitada glanced around and realized the others had also appeared around her. Cathiel immediately rushed to support Jerath who appeared beside her. The elf sagged, and she realized he was badly injured.

Wynne's voice rang out. "You will not hold us, demon. We found each other in this place and you cannot stand against us."

"You made a dangerous enemy, demon, by toying with my mind." Morrigan practically sneered as she readied her staff.

"It is time to finish this." Sten drew his sword. "I have had enough of cages."

"If you go back quietly, I'll do better this time. I'll make you much happier." The demon's voice was mocking.

"We don't want anything you offer," Brehan said, his voice raw.

"I made you happy and safe. I gave you peace. I did my best for you and you say you want to leave? Can't you think about someone other than yourself? I'm hurt, so very, very hurt." It sounded annoyed.

"Sorry, but I'd rather just be rid of your evil right now." Saitada

readied her shield as she started towards it.

"You wish to battle me? So be it... you will learn to bow to your betters, mortal!"

The demon shifted into the form of an ogre, batting Brehan and Brosca aside effortlessly. It lowered its head and charged. Cathiel managed to throw herself and Jerath out of the way. Wynne and Lenore weren't so lucky, and were sent flying. Zevran tried to come at it from behind, slashing at its legs. The ogre grabbed him and flung him into Sten, who just barely managed to lower his sword in time to not skewer the elf. The two went down in a heap. It roared at Saitada, and started to lower its head again, when Jerath leapt on its back, burying both daggers into its shoulders. It threw back its head, and Saitada took the opening, driving her blade into its now-exposed throat. It reared back, yanking her sword out of her hand, and twisted. Jerath lost his grip and tumbled to the ground where he lay unmoving. The ogre roared again, and Cathiel put an arrow into its open mouth. The ogre staggered a moment, then, collapsed. As it fell, the world around them began to break apart.

"You defeated the demon. I never thought..." Saitada turned to see a man in mage robes speaking. His face was overjoyed. "I never expected you to get free, to free us all." He looked towards them. "When you return... take the Litany of Adralla from my..." He hesitated a moment. "Body. It will protect you from the worst of the blood magic."

Saitada nodded as the dream faded away.

32. Chapter 32

Saitada awoke, and reached for her blade. Around her, the others were stirring. She saw the body of the young man...the one that had spoken to them in the Fade. His fingers were still clutched around a scroll case.

"Lenore!" Cathiel's voice was frantic. Wynne and Lenore rushed over to where Cathiel was kneeling beside Jerath. The elf was pale and wide-eyed, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth as he gasped for breath. Together, the mages wove the healing spell over him. Morrigan joined them, and after a moment, the elf's breathing became steady.

"Is he..." Saitada started to ask.

Cathiel made a choking noise. "I shot him."

"I believe he will be fine. Injuries received in the fade do not transfer to reality, at least, not physically. His condition looks similar to that of an apprentice shortly after a harrowing. It is exhaustion, mainly. We seem to have escaped the fade in time for him," Wynne said.

Morrigan cradled Jerath's head in her lap. "Finish what you came to do. I will remain here with him."

"Are you certain?"

"I will keep him safe." She brushed his hair from his face possessively, shooting Cathiel a look as she did so.

Saitada hesitated, and then nodded. "The rest of you, come with me."

#

Lenore let out a gasp as she saw the templar inside the magical barrier. Bruises stood out starkly on Cullen's pale face. His eyes went wide when he saw her. "This trick again? I know what you are. It won't work. I will stay strong..."

"Cullen! Don't you recognize me?" She went to the side of the barrier and began looking for a way to bring it down.

"Only too well... how far they must have delved into my thoughts..."

Wynne came up next to her. Sympathy filled her voice. "The boy is exhausted. And this cage...I've never seen anything like it. Rest easy... help is here."

"Enough visions. If anything in you is human... kill me now and stop this game." Cullen tried to stand, and failed.

Leliana began rummaging in her bag. "He's delirious. He's been tortured... and has probably been denied food and water. I can tell. Here, I have a skin of-

"Don't touch me! Stay away! Sifting through my thoughts... tempting me with the one thing I always wanted but could never have. Using my shame against me... my ill-advised infatuation with her... a mage, of all things." He looked at her, and Lenore took a step back. There was hatred in his eyes.

"Someone was quite the little heart-breaker when they were an apprentice. My, my." She nearly turned around and threw a fireball in Zevran's face as she heard his mocking words.

"I'm so tired of these cruel jokes... these tricks... these..." Cullen's voice trailed off.

Lenore knelt to look him in the eyes. "This is no trick. We're here to help."

"Silence... I'll not listen to anything you say. Now begone!" He looked back at her, and his eyes widened. "Still here? But that's always worked before. I close my eyes, but you are still here when I open them."

"I'm real, and I'm here to help you."

"Don't blame me for being cautious. The voices... the images...so real..." His voice was little more than a whisper.

She tried to smile. "I bet you wish you hadn't said those things."

He snarled. "I am beyond caring what you think. The Maker knows my sin, and I pray he will forgive me."

"I never wanted to cause you pain."

"You are a mage and I, a Templar. It is my duty to oppose you and all you are." He shook his head. "Why have you returned to the tower? How did you survive?"

"Is it so surprising that I've returned? This was my home."

"As it was mine. And look what they've done to it. They deserve to die. Uldred most of all. They caged us like animals... looked for ways to break us. I'm the only one left..."

"Be proud. You mastered yourself," Sten said.

"Be proud? What is there to be proud of? That I lived and they died? They turned some into... monsters. And... there was nothing I could do."

"You must stay strong," she said, as she used her magic to prod at the cage. The barrier held firm.

"And to think I once thought we were too hard on you." There was disgust in his eyes when he looked at her. Maker, he was looking at her the way Bratin used to.

"We're not all evil, Cullen." She felt tears pricking at her eyes.

"Only mages have that much power at their fingertips. Only mages are so susceptible to the infernal whisperings of the demons." He hurled the words at her.

"This is a discussion for another time!" Wynne put a hand on

her shoulder. "Irving and the other mages who fought Ulred. Where are they?"

"They are in the Harrowing Chamber. The sounds coming out from there... oh, Maker..."

"We must hurry. They are in grave danger, I am sure of it."

Cullen managed to get to his feet. "You can't save them. You don't know what they've become."

"I am a mage too, Cullen." Lenore used her staff to stand up.

"They've been surrounded b-by blood mages whose wicked fingers snake into your mine and corrupt your thoughts."

Wynne's hand tightened on her shoulder. "He's suffered pain and anguish like few have had to endure. That and his lust for revenge have confused the issue - - "

"Do not presume to judge me, mage! I am thinking clearly - - for perhaps the first time in my life."

Saitada began walking to the stairs. "I want to save everyone who can possibly be saved."

"Are you really saving anyone by taking this risk? To ensure this horror is ended... to guarantee no abominations or blood mages live, you must kill everyone up there."

Saitada looked at him, then looked to Lenore. She shook her head. "I cannot decide on that before seeing what's going on."

"That is your choice to make, but I beg you to consider what I have to say. You cannot tell maleficarum by sight. Just one could influence the mind of a king, of a grand cleric."

"I've made my decision," Saitada said as she started climbing the stairs.

"Maker turn his gaze on you. I hope your compassion hasn't doomed us all."

#

Lenore felt sick as they entered the harrowing chamber. Leorah's body was sprawled near the door, her glazed eyes staring out of her ruined face. Her teachers, her mentors, writhed in cages of cruel magic. And there, standing in the center, an almost fatherly smile on his face, stood Uldred. His smile widened when he saw her. "Ah... look what we have here. I remember you. Irving's star pupil." His voice was strange, echoing inhumanly. "Uldred didn't think much of you then, and I certainly don't see your appeal now..."

Her staff glowed. "I think I'll just kill you, if that's all right with you."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Fight if you must. It will just make my victory all the sweeter."

"Don't forget the Litany. It will thwart Uldred's attempts to control the mages and win this fight for us," Wynne's voice whispered urgently.

Maker take the litany. Lenore called the spell to her and sent a blast of lightning right into Uldred's smug face. The mage flew backwards. She started to call up another spell. Across the room, he rose... and then kept rising, his form twisting and growing as it reshaped itself. Pride.

Wynne shoved the litany at Leliana and began weaving her own spells. Mages that had already fallen to Uldred began moving towards them. Cathiel began firing arrows rapidly as the others moved quickly, striking at the mages before they could fully gather their powers.

Lenore focused her power on Uldred. She could dimly make out Leliana's voice reading from the litany when Uldred tried to force the surviving mages into the fray. Brosca moved at her side, smashing his mace into a shade that tried to reach her as she continued hurling spells.

The pride demon screamed as it fell, twisting and decaying. A foul odor of rot filled the air as the thing dissolved into a pile of rags. A nothing that had once been one of the best of the circle. She closed her eyes for a moment.

Mages were trying to stand, freed from the spells by the death throes of Uldred. Wynne moved to help one of them. Lenore shook her head, and went to help another. There was work still to be done.

#

Irving managed to get to his feet after Brosca practically

forced one of the restorative potions down his throat. "Maker. I'm too old for this."

"Irving! Are you all right?" Wynne asked.

"I've..." He groaned. "Been better. But I am thankful to be alive. I suppose that is your doing, isn't it, Wynne?"

"I wasn't alone. I had help." Wynne gestured to where Lenore was weaving a healing spell over the last of injured mages. Brosca glanced in that direction. His friend was pale, almost a bit wobbily as she stood. He went to her side.

Irving looked at her. "I was surprised to see you standing there. But I am glad you have returned." He looked around, taking in the wardens and their companions. "The circle owes all of you a debt we will never be able to repay." He leaned heavily on his staff. "Come, the templars await. We shall let them know the tower is once again ours."

"Very well, lead on," Saitada said, nodding at him.

"I'll need you to guide me down the stairs..." Irving said. Alistair immediately moved to the man's side and got an arm under his shoulder. "Ah, curse whoever insisted the Circle be housed in a tower."

#

When they came back downstairs, there were several more of the ambulant corpses lying around the room. The cage

binding the templar had collapsed, and Morrigan was watching the man with a wary eye, her hand tight on her staff.

Jerath appeared to be unconscious. Sten walked over, and with a grunt, simply picked the smaller man up and began to follow the others out. Morrigan trailed behind, ignoring the presence of the other mages.

Cathiel put a hand on Lenore's shoulder. The mage kept looking over at where Brehan was helping Cullen get to his feet, her expression crushed. Gently, she guided the mage after the others.

#

Genuine relief showed on Greagoir's face when he saw them. "Irving? Maker's breath, I did not expect to see you alive." He took Irving from Alistair and helped the First Enchanter to a chair.

"It is over, Greagoir. Uldred... is dead." Irving accepted one of the restorative potions gratefully.

Cullen looked up from where Brehan had seated him. "Uldred tortured these mages, hoping to break their wills and turn them into abominations. We don't know how many of them have turned."

"What?" Irving shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Of course he'll say that! He might be a blood mage! Don't

you know what they did? I won't let this happen again!" He tried to stand up, and Brehan pushed him back into the chair.

Greagoir gave Cullen a surprisingly sympathetic look, but his voice was firm. "I am the knight-commander here, not you." He looked back at the others.

Saitada stepped forward. "I believe order has been restored to the Circle."

Greagoir nodded to her. Irving stood, and looked at the surviving mages. "We will rebuild. The Circle will go on, and we will learn from this tragedy, and be strengthened by it."

"We have won back the tower." Greagoir nodded to Irving. "I will accept Irving's assurance that all is well."

"But they may have demons within them, lying dormant... lying in wait!" Cullen tried to stand up again, and nearly stumbled before Brehan caught him and put him back in the chair.

"Enough! I have already made my decision." Greagoir gave them a small bow. "Thank you. You have proven yourselves friends of both the Circle, and the templars."

"It had to be done." Lenore pulled her eyes away from Cullen to look at Greagoir.

"I promised you aid, but with the Circle restored, my duty is to watch the mages. They are free to help you, however. Speak to them."

"And what will the templars do?" Saitada asked.

"For now, I will have to oversee a sweep of the tower. There may be some survivors and we should do our best to tend to them. Please, excuse me. And Irving..." He put a hand on Irving's shoulder. "It is good to have you back."

Irving smiled. "Ah, I'm sure we will be at each other's throats again in no time."

#

Lenore went to sit next to Irving. Brosca was almost hovering, and she sent him a smile.

"Here we are, the tower in disarray, the Circle nearly annihilated... though it could have been much, much worse. I am glad you arrived when you did. It is almost as though the Maker Himself sent you."

"I'm glad I could help"

"From what Greagoir said, it seems you came here seeking allies. The least we can do is help you against the darkspawn. I would hate to survive this only to be overcome by the Blight."

"But there are so few mages left." Her throat was tight. The templars had managed to find a few other survivors, but nearly a third of the mages and no few of the templars lay among the dead.

"You of all people should know that we are not to be

underestimated. The mages you see here will be of great help to you. You have my word, as first enchanter. The Circle will join the Grey Wardens in the fight."

Wynne joined them. "Irving, I have a request. I seek leave to follow the Grey Wardens."

"Wynne... we need you here. The Circle needs you."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Irving, but the Circle will do fine without me. The Circle has you. These people are brave and good, and capable of great things. If they will accept my help, I will help them accomplish their goals."

Lenore smiled warmly. "We'd be honored to have you join us, Wynne."

Irving just shook his head in a fond manner. "You were never one to stay in the tower when there was adventure to be had elsewhere."

"Why stay when I can be of service elsewhere?" Wynne asked, shrugging her shoulders.

"Then I give you leave to follow the Grey Wardens, but know that you always have a place here. There is much to be done here, and I must go. You must forgive me for not being a proper host."

Lenore blinked as she suddenly remembered the reason they'd come in the first place. "Can the Circle go to Redcliffe

to save a possessed child?"

"The child is possessed? But... killing the demon would mean killing the - Unless you intend to enter the Fade? Yes... yes, it can be done with a group of mages... I shall gather what mages I can and we shall leave promptly. A life is at stake." He stood, moving with a bit of his old vigor.

#

He woke to see the older mage standing over him. She reached to put a hand on his forehead, and he pulled away almost out of reflex. She blinked. "You're awake."

"Did we win?"

"The Circle of Magi is safe once more."

He swallowed, and tried to focus. "They made it out?"

"The wardens came through none the worse for wear," Morrigan said from where she was sitting next to him.

Something was off. He felt wrong, almost empty. He started to turn towards Morrigan, to ask her something, and darkness closed over him once more.

#

Wynne stepped out of the tent, closing it behind her. "He woke up a bit, asked if we'd won. I assured him we had, and that everyone survived, and he went back to sleep. He'll sleep

a while longer, I think, but he will be alright."

Saitada nodded. "We are out of the tower now, anyway. What happened in there?"

"The demon trapped us all in the fade." Lenore answered. "In dreams. It's how it... feeds, I suppose."

"Oh, great. I just love the thought of being demon-chow." Brosca grouched.

"It's similar, in some ways, to what we are going to do regarding Connor. Find our way through the Fade, find the demon, and kill it." Lenore finished.

"You'll be stuck in another dream?"

"No... I'd be in Connor's dream, not one made for me." She sighed. "It won't be able to fool me as easily."

Brosca sat next to the mage. "Cheer up, girl. It's not like you were the only one got hoodwinked."

"Jerath broke me out of it," Saitada mused.

"Me too..." Brehan said.

Lenore glanced at them. "He broke me out as well."

"It appears the young man had quite the busy time in the fade. No wonder he is exhausted." Wynne said, her tone matronly.

Lenore's face abruptly turned red. "I wonder how much of it he'll remember."

"He should remember everything, I suppose. Just as we do." Wynne responded.

Lenore drew her robes up around her. "Oh, Maker..." At Saitada's raised eyebrow, Lenore winced. "I was kind of... it was an embarrassing situation. And then I tried to kill him."

"Same here." Cathiel added. "Well, not the embarrassing situation part. The tried to kill him part."

Brehan sighed. "I shot him. A little, anyway."

"Huh." Brosca said. "I just offered him a mug of Tapster's finest."

Saitada gave Brosca a look of mock horror. "You... fiend..."

Lenore shook her head. "I wonder how he managed to break out... and then find all of us. He was wounded when my dream began."

"Same here." Saitada added. "Though he didn't appear to have been shot by anyone. Just set on fire."

"That er... wasn't me. I didn't set him on fire." Lenore glanced at Wynne.

"I did not cast any spells at that young man." Wynne said, disapprovingly.

"Might be why Morrigan is acting so mother-hen. She had her first feeling, and it was a guilty one." Brosca chimed in.

#

Brehan entered the tent, carrying a tray of food. Jerath sat up as he entered. "Good, you are awake. Thought you might be hungry."

"A bit."

Brehan sat the tray down before seating himself. "You feeling okay?"

Jerath nodded. "I would be up and walking, but Wynne gave me a Look."

"Yeah, she's good enough at those to be a Keeper. Um... I'm sorry about shooting you. In the fade."

Jerath nodded. "I am sorry, about Tamlen."

"We'd been friends since before we could walk. He should be here with us now. Wardening." He sighed. "Though you'd have probably killed both of us before we even got to Ostagar," he smiled fondly, before turning to look at the ground. "Anyway, I just, wanted to thank you. For breaking me out of it. I think some part of me knew it wasn't real all along, but..."

Jerath nodded.

Brehan smiled. "Anyway, if you want to get some food in you

and get out of the way, Brosca and I will get your tent packed up and we'll be underway."

"Thank you."

"Oh, Saitada told Sten that if you don't get in the wagon on your own, he's to put you there and sit on you if needed."

"I appreciate the warning."

#

Brosca shook his head as he watched Brehan of all people try to fuss over Jerath. If Songbird didn't watch himself, he was going to find himself on the wrong end of Junior's sword. After two days on the road, the kid was looking like his old self again. Saitada was still insisting he ride in the wagon with Wynne.

He couldn't blame her. On the field with a weapon in each hand, it was easy to forget how young the guy was. Unconscious like that, he'd looked younger than some of the apprentices. Seeing him down and out had shaken Brosca more than he liked to admit. Cathiel had whispered something to that hound of hers, and Griffon was practically laying on the elf.

Even Morrigan was shooting the kid worried looks. He didn't blame her, the kid was the only person who seemed able to tolerate her. With a shrug, he caught the side of the wagon and pulled himself in. "Lazy," he said, as he plunked himself

down next to Jerath.

A look that Brosca could only describe as full on petulant crossed Jerath's normally composed face. "I hate you."

"Nick anything good from the tower?" Wynne gave him a disapproving look. He grinned at her. "What? I'm just being a bad influence."

"I can see that."

"I don't steal from allies," Jerath said.

Brosca nodded. "Fancy a game of diamondback?"

"And now you are teaching him to gamble?" Wynne folded her arms.

"Gotta pass the time somehow, right?"

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "Sounds good."

"Right." Brosca dug in his pocket, then frowned. He searched his other pocket. "I coulda..."

Jerath offered him the deck. Brosca looked at it, and then laughed.

33. Chapter 33

Saitada told the rest of her group to take a well-deserved break when they reached Redcliffe. She took herself to the castle library, and noted almost absently that Sten fell into step with her.

"You are not quite as callow as I thought," he said, glancing down at her. "That is... unexpected."

"Um..." She shrugged. "Thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome."

"What were you quoting earlier?"

"The writings of the Ashkaari Koslun. The Qun. It is the path to wisdom."

She looked up at him. "What is the Qun, exactly?"

He looked surprised, and then pleased by the question. "Ask a tamassran: they know how to explain things to children. It is not for me to teach the Qun."

She nodded, and walked into the library. "You can read the King's Tongue, yes?"

"I can."

"I'll start here, you start there. Ferelden history, last decade. Ferelden law. I can't plan a battle unless I know the field."

#

Isolde rushed to Lenore the moment she entered the room. "I see you have returned. Connor is upstairs and remains quiet, for the moment." She wrung her hands. "Have you made a decision?"

"We brought the mages. We'll need a space to work."

"Of course. Anything."

Lenore gave her a few instructions, then waited for the others. Irving entered a minute later, followed by the other mages. Matthias led the templars with them. He gave her a friendly smile when he saw her, and touched Irving's arm.

"Ah!" Irving said. "There you are." He gestured. "We have brought lyrium and begun preparations for the ritual. We can start anytime."

"Do you have any last-minute advice?" Lenore asked him.

He considered. "It truly depends on the manner of demon. It sounds like a spirit of greed and desire, one of the more powerful in the hierarchy. It will likely engage you in dialog and tempt you with an offer. Avoid it. Making deals with demons never turns out well."

"Let's do this now," Lenore said. She didn't have to add 'before I lose my nerve'. He saw that in her eyes. The confidence she'd felt when suggesting this plan had vanished when she'd been so trapped by the illusion she'd tortured a friend.

"Very well. I assume you are going into the Fade." He gave her a concerned look. "Or did you have someone else in mind?"

Wynne was no combat mage. Morrigan... the swamp witch would probably sell them all out. "I will go."

He smiled at her, his face proud. "Good. Let us get the ritual underway, then."

#

"Why did you decide to come to Ferelden?" Brehan asked.

"My mother was from Denerim and I consider myself a Ferelden. Mother served an Orlesian noblewoman who lived here when Orlais ruled." She shrugged. "When Orlais was defeated and the common folk began to resent the presence of any Orlesian, the lady returned to Orlais. She took my mother with her. I was born in Orlais, and did not set foot in Ferelden till much later. Mother was always telling me stories of her homeland; I think she missed it."

"What happened to your mother?"

"Mother died when I was very young. Lady Cecilie let me stay with her. I had no one else. She was quite old then, and she had me study music and dance to entertain her. It is unfair, that I have more memories of Cecilie than my mother."

"You were young, it's understandable." He couldn't even call up the face of his own mother.

"Strangely, the only thing I really remember of Mother was her scent. She kept dried flowers in her closet, amongst her clothes. Small, white Ferelden wildflowers with a sweet fragrance. Mother called them Andraste's Grace. They were very rare in Orlais."

"Ashalle, the woman who raised me, said my mother used to wear a crown of them in her hair."

"Tell me of your mother."

"I don't remember her. She was a hunter from another clan. My father was the keeper then, but her elders did not approve of the match. They used to meet in secret." He leaned against the wall. "Bandits, shems and flat ears, caught them alone in the forest. My father was killed. My mother was wounded, but made it to his clan. She never recovered, from the wound or grief." He sighed. "One night she walked into the woods and never returned. I was still an infant."

Leliana laid a hand on his arm. "She abandoned you?"

"Ashalle said she couldn't carry on without my father. I had

received my vallaslin before any would tell me the true story. They did not wish it to poison my heart." He set his hand on Leliana's. "Ashalle raised me as her own. And Hahren Paivel was like a father to me. He wanted me to take over for him as the clan storyteller one day." He saw the sadness in her eyes, and decided to change the subject. "You were a traveling minstrel. Do you have tales to share?"

Children, and then no few adults, began trickling over as he and Leliana began exchanging tales.

#

Lenore made her way through the fade. It was dizzying, wandering past versions of the Arl and Connor as she sought the demon. "How did Jerath manage this?" she asked herself before shaking her head.

Yet another fake version of Connor tried to send her back. When she refused, it turned into a demon and sent shades after her. She caught one with fire, but had to resort to pure energy for the second as it closed quickly. "He probably just stabbed things until they got out of the way. Maybe I should let Brosca give me another lesson on knives." She sighed. "And now I'm talking to myself. I bet he didn't walk through the fade talking to himself."

She found the demon. It manifested before her, a beautiful, purple skinned woman. "No more illusions." The demon's voice sounded slightly amused. "Now we meet face to face. You see my true form and stand in my domain." She gave Lenore

a sultry look. "Perhaps we should converse instead?"

"And I'll bet he didn't talk to demons either," Lenore said to himself. She tightened her grip on her staff. "There will be no discussion," she said as she called her power to her.

"Alas, that is sad." The demoness split into multiple versions of herself, forcing Lenore to divide her attention as she attempted to pick out which was the real one. It felt good though, hitting it over and over again. Finally, it floated, motionless. Around her the fade shifted and bent, and finally dissolved away.

#

"Are you all right?" Irving asked her.

"I'm fine. Connor?"

"Asleep. I believe he will be alright. Given the circumstances, I will leave him here a while longer. Matthias has agreed to remain, and will escort the boy to the tower when things are less..."

"Mad?"

"Should such ever occur," Irving said with a small smile.

Lenore stood, and wobbled slightly. Matthias caught her arm as she regained her balance. "Perhaps you should rest?" the templar asked.

"I think I should eat," Lenore said. "I was too nervous for breakfast."

He nodded. "I'll walk with you to the kitchen. There was a dwarf who was quite adamant he be informed the moment you woke up."

Lenore leaned on him as they made their way down the stairs. "Thank you for looking after Connor."

"I owe you my life twice now," he said to her.

"I don't think the first one counts," she said. "I was partly responsible for you being injured in the first place."

"Either way, looking after this boy you were willing to risk yourself for seems the least I can do." He gestured to one of the servants as he led her to a table. "I will let your dwarf know. Take care of yourself."

"You too." She sighed. "And... take care of Cullen?"

"We will."

#

Lenore hesitated a moment before entering the room. She walked to where Jerath sat in the windowsill, and settled herself down on the chair next to him. For a moment, they both sat there in silence.

"I... thank you," Lenore said quietly, not looking at the elf.

When he did not respond, she continued, "you came for all of us, in the fade. We'd have been far too late to save the others, perhaps we'd even have been lost entirely, if you hadn't come. I... I'm sorry I hurt you."

Jerath made a sound that was somewhere between a grunt and a sigh. "It's alright, Lenore. You weren't in your right mind."

"No. No, it's not all right. Nothing about that was alright. I tried to kill you, I nearly killed you, and then we made it all the way back to Redcliff before I even remembered to thank you for saving me." Lenore brought her fists down on her legs in frustration. "It's not all right. It's not..." she buried her face in her hands as the sobs came.

After a few moments, she felt his hand on her shoulder. "The ritual for Connor? I take it that it worked?"

Lenore nodded. "He'd made a bargain with a desire demon. She tried to make me an offer to let her keep him. Blasting her face in... ugh, it felt good." She smiled at him. "I truly am sorry, for the spell."

"At least it wasn't a fireball." Jerath shrugged. "I think I've had my fill of being set on fire."

"Thank you, Jerath." She looked up at him. "In the fade... it was so confusing, trying to find another's dreams. I just... I just kept thinking, you did it for all of us. Did you have to fight demons? I mean, other than the despair demon?"

"A few."

"Maker." She shook her head. "If you weren't a warden, you should be a templar."

"You grew up there, at the tower?"

"Yes. I was sent when I was seven." She shrugged. "That's when my magic manifested."

"Did you know an apprentice named Varla?"

Lenore smiled. "Yes. We took some lessons together. She was really good with ice magic." Her voice became fond. "She could take a glass of water, and form it into an ice sculpture. It was amazing, but it took a lot of concentration. I never managed to form more than a circle." She looked up at him, then realization slowly dawned in her eyes. "She said once she had a baby brother, back in Denerim."

He nodded, then looked out the window for a moment before turning back to her. "Do you know if they caught her?"

Lenore shook her head. "Not that they ever told me. I can ask, if you want." She considered. "Matthias or Irving might know."

He shook his head. "If she's gone, better she remain that way."

#

Wynne found her buried under a stack of books. She'd let the woman fill her in on what happened with Connor before setting her to research as well. Teagan had helped her narrow her search once she'd told him what she hoped to find, but he'd pointed out that as a mere Bann, his options were limited. He'd already antagonized Loghain, it seemed, and Zevran had mentioned that Howe had insinuated that Teagan was to be the Crow's next target.

Lenore's templar friend, Matthias, seemed a solid warrior, and Lenore swore he was trustworthy. She'd mentioned the potential of assassins to him, and he'd stated he could find some excuse or another to remain at the castle. The Crows seemed a bit leery of the Chantry's gaze turning on them.

At another table, Sten was going over a map of Ferelden and the reports Teagan had given them regarding Loghain's troop movements. Ferelden was on the brink of civil war, at the worst possible time.

Saitada closed a book, and shoved it aside irritably. There was really no way around them needing Arl Eamon. Or possibly Cathiel's brother, if he'd survived.

Wynne looked over at her, and set down her quill. "I must ask: What does being a Grey Warden mean to you?"

Saitada leaned back in her chair. "It means I've been chosen to do something important."

"There's that, of course, but there's more to being a Grey

Warden than killing darkspawn and saving the world from the Blight."

"Of course. We are the front line, the ones that lead the fight, who shed their blood so that no other blood need be shed. I remember Trian, telling me about what it meant to be a military commander in Orzammar. 'We must not forget that we too, are warriors, and that the only way the enemies will ever reach Orzammar is over our corpses'."

"Who is Trian?"

"He is..." She sighed. "He was my brother."

"I am sorry. He sounds like a wise man."

"He could be that, sometimes. Perhaps he could even have become a good king, if he ever mellowed a bit."

"Pardon, did you say king?" Teagan's head came up from where he'd been going over a report.

Saitada gave a small laugh. "Ah. We never really did do formal introductions, did we? Before I became a Grey Warden, I was Saitada Aeducan, second child of King Endrin Aeducan. I had just been given the rank of military commander when I was exiled."

"Exiled?" Wynne's face showed her surprise.

"Let's just say Orzammar could teach Loghain a lesson or ten in backstabbing politics. My younger brother wanted the

throne. Trian and I were in the way. Trian was killed, and I was blamed for his death."

"I'm sorry," Wynne said, her voice sympathetic.

"I lost one family." She shook her head. "But, becoming a Warden has given me another." Then she laughed. "A surprisingly more functional one, in spite of their differences."

"They seem like good people."

"And look, we've even added a grandmother to the mix."

"I am not sure I am quite old enough to be your grandmother, young lady." Wynne folded her arms as Teagan laughed.

#

Brosca noted the assassin walking down the hall. He shrugged, and caught up with him. "Care to answer some questions?"

"Oh? This should be good. Go ahead."

"You're from Antiva?"

"Oh? You wish to know about Antiva, do you?" He laughed. "The only way to truly appreciate it would be to go there." His voice became fond. "It is a warm place, not cold and harsh like this Ferelden. In Antiva, it rains often, but the flowers are always in bloom... or so the saying goes."

"And it has assassins."

"Every land has its assassins. Some are simply more open about their business than others." Zevran shrugged. "I hail from the glorious Antiva City, home to the royal palace. It is a glittering gem amidst the sand, my Antiva City. Do you come from someplace comparable?"

"I am from Orzammar, of course." Brosca shrugged. "Not the glittering part."

"Ahhh, yes, the city of lava and stone. It, too, is beautiful in its way. Sad that it will never see sunlight or smell the salt of the ocean, however." Zevran's eyes grew wistful. "Hmm. You know what is most odd? We speak of my homeland, and for all its wine and its dark-haired beauties and the lillo flutes of the minstrels... I miss the leather the most."

Brosca chuckled. He found himself rather liking the way the elf talked. "Is that some kind of euphemism?"

Zevran laughed. "It may as well be! But not this once, no. I mean the smell. For years I lived in a tiny apartment near Antiva City's leather-making district, in a building where the Crows stored their youngest recruits. Packed in like crates." He shook his head fondly. "I grew accustomed to the stench, even though the humans complained of it constantly. To this day the smell of fresh leather is what reminds me most of home more than anything else."

"You sound like you've been away from home forever." He

wondered if the day would ever come that he actually missed Orzammar, rather than just missing Rica and Leske.

"Oh, not so long, I know. It is my first time away from Antiva, however, and the thought of never returning makes me think of it constantly." He gave a regretful shrug. "Before I left, I was tempted to spend what little coin I possessed on leather boots I spotted in a store window. Finest Antivan leather, perfect craftsmanship... AH, but I was a fool to leave them." He smiled ruefully. "I thought, 'Ah, Zevran, you can buy them when you return as a reward for a job well done!'. More the fool I, no?"

Brosca grinned. "Your home is still there, Zevran."

"True, and it's a comforting thought." He winked at Brosca. "One simply never knows what is to come next. How could I have suspected I would end up defeated by a handsome Grey Warden, a man who then spares my life? I could not."

"Handsome?"

"Hm... Perhaps that was a poor choice of words, true though it is. Do you object?"

"Not at all. It was just unexpected."

"And glad I am to hear it." Zevran stretched his neck from side to side. "Now, if it is all the same to you, I would prefer not to speak of Antiva. It makes me wistful and hungry for a proper meal."

"Tavern has some decent ale. Was thinking of finding Lenore and dragging her out for a congratulatory drink. Join us?"

"I would be delighted."

#

They'd been in Redcliffe two days before Jerath finally got a chance to leave the room without someone fussing over him. There had been a few moments when he'd considered leaving by the window. He found Morrigan in a tower, one with a view of the lake.

She glanced at him, and actually smiled. "You have escaped your jailors."

"I was starting to consider gnawing my leg off."

"Their concern was not wholly unjustified. The fade is dangerous enough for a mage to traverse." She gave him a considering look. "I am impressed."

He offered her the tome he'd found in the First Enchanter's office. Her eyes widened. "What? You found Flemeth's grimoire?" She took it from him almost reverently, her eyes revealing her amazement. "When I spoke of it to you, I did not truly hope... ah, but this is a most fortuitous event!" She smiled. "You have my thanks. I will begin study of the tome immediately."

"What do you hope to find within it?" He considered telling her

about the rage, and what had happened in the fade, and then decided against it. It was still raw.

"Secrets. My mother has many of them, and this tome represents the one time that they were able to get away from her." She opened it, her eyes scanning the page eagerly. "I do not intend to squander this opportunity to learn more than Flemeth wished me to know. This should be... interesting."

He nodded, then started to walk away. He turned back after a few steps. "How did you become a shapechanger?"

"I was not born such. 'Tis a skill of Flemeth's, taught over many years in the Wilds. The Chasind have tales of we witches, saying we assume the forms of creatures to watch them from hiding. When a child is alone and separate from his tribe, that is when we strike, dragging the young boy kicking and screaming to our lair to be devoured. A most amusing legend."

He shook his head. "Seems a rather impractical way to hunt. I truly doubt children would be worth the effort. So many of them are filthy, smelly things full of tears and snot and trouble."

She laughed. "I cannot speak for the tastes of my mother. She has, after all, lived a very lengthy time in the Wilds and done many things I know nothing of."

"Your mother has been doing this for a long time, then?"

"Change her form, certainly. Devouring lost children, I cannot say. She has not done it in my experience, though in truth my lifespan is but a fraction of her own. Why do you ask? Is there something specific you wish to know?"

He thought back to the fade, and how he'd managed to change his form. "I've never heard of magic like that before."

"No? 'Tis not unheard of, in remote corners of the world. There are traditions of magic outside of the Circle of Magi, despite what those mages would have you believe. Some of these traditions are old, indeed, passed down as carefully-guarded lore from one generation to the next. The zealots of the Chantry would uproot all such practitioners if they could, but as luck have it some still exist. My mother is such a one."

"That's good. Such traditions need to be preserved."

"I am surprised you think so. Still, 'tis a pleasant thing to hear."

"Can anyone become a shapechanger?"

"Anyone with sufficient will. But the act of transformation is a magical one. 'Tis a spell, and thus requires a mage's talents. If you had a notion to learn such a skill for yourself, sadly you must remain disappointed."

He leaned on the windowframe. "Do you spend a lot of time as an animal?"

"There were nights when the Wilds called to me, 'tis true. You look upon the world around you and you think you know it will. I have smelled it as a wolf, listened as a cat, prowled shadows that you never dreamed existed. But my life is as a human. I am under no illusions to the contrary."

"Thank you for indulging my curiosity." He started to walk away again.

Her voice called him back. "Have you an opinion on my abilities, then? Am I an unnatural abomination to be put to the torch?"

"I find myself envious." That much was true. Even the time he'd spent as a mouse had been exhilarating in its own way. "Your abilities sound quite useful."

"Oh? You're simply full of surprises, little man, aren't you?" Her smile actually reached her eyes. He nodded, and left her to her tome.

#

Cathiel clutched the item to her. She'd spent most of the morning prowling around the castle, seeing what she could find. It was too much like home for her to be able to relax. She kept expecting to see her father walk around the corner, or hear Oriana calling after Oren. If she kept moving, she could almost stay ahead of the memories.

Alistair was engaged in battle against a practice dummy. She

watched for a few moments. He spun, then caught her eye and smiled. He really did have a great smile, she thought to herself. She walked towards him. "Got a minute?"

"For you, I have days," he said, setting the sword aside.

"Here." She placed the item in his hand.

He gave her a confused look, then looked down at it. "This..." His voice choked slightly. "This is my mother's amulet. It has to be. But why isn't it broken? Where did you find it?"

"I found it in the castle, in the study."

"Oh." He looked at it again, then back up at her. "The arl's study?" He shook his head. "Then he must have... found the amulet after I threw it at the wall. And he repaired it and kept it? I don't understand, why would he do that?"

She set her hand on his arm. "Perhaps you mean more to him than you think."

His face softened. "I... guess you could be right. We never really talked that much, and then the way I left..." He looked into her eyes. "Thank you. I mean it. I... thought I'd lost this to my own stupidity." He looked back up at the castle. "I'll need to talk to him about this." His face fell a little. "If he recovers from his..." He shook his head and closed his hand around the amulet. "When he recovers, that is. I wish I'd had this a long time ago." He put it around his neck, then looked back at her. "Did you remember me mentioning it? Wow. I'm more used to

people not really listening when I go on about things."

She blinked at him. "Sorry? Did you say something?"

"Ho, ho, ho. See this gesture I'm making. Can you hear that?"

She smiled at him fondly. "Of course I remembered. You're special to me."

He blushed. "I don't know what to say. You're special to me, too. Thank you again." He shuffled his feet. "Is this the part where the music starts and we begin dancing? Because I'm game. Where's the minstrels?"

"I think they got dragged to the tavern by some of the locals who wanted to buy them drinks. We could head over, find out if Brehan can hold his liquor?"

"Ooh, now, that does sound entertaining."

#

The next morning, Saitada sent a runner around to gather her companions. Brehan and Leliana were quite clearly nursing hangovers under the disapproving stare of Wynne. Brosca sat on a bench, with Lenore next to him, plaiting his beard while Zevran offered up a few suggestions. Cathiel and Alistair were deep in conversation. Morrigan and Jerath sat tucked away, apparently engrossed in some sort of board game. Sten waited for her by the door.

"We need a Landsmeet," she said as she looked around the

room. "Without one, we've no way to get Ferelden behind us. So our next destination is Denerim, to see what we can do to either get Eamon back on his feet, or find some other way of calling one."

"We could talk to Arl Urien, in Denerim," Cathiel suggested.

Saitada shook her head. "He died at Ostagar."

"Then Vaughan is Arl. He won't be much help."

"He's dead too," Jerath said.

"Which leaves Denerim without an Arl." Cathiel tapped a finger to her lip

Saitada rubbed her head. "Actually, it seems Denerim does have an Arl. Howe."

"I..."

"Cathiel, I know you want him dead, and I agree. But we need allies before we can move against him directly. He gets in the way of one of your arrows, that's fine, but we can't go hunting him right now."

Cathiel sighed, and nodded. "Okay."

"There is this urn of Sacred Ashes business, and a Brother Genitivi. Teagan is going to see what he can do for us on his end. For now, Redcliffe is our base of operations. Brehan, any way to send a runner to your people?"

Brehan considered, and then shook his head. "Things the way they are, I'd have to go myself."

"Let's table that thought for now." She sighed, and then looked at Brosca. "Pack up, people. Denerim awaits."

34. Chapter 34

The road was easier this time, with adequate supplies. Teagan had offered them a cart, but Saitada had decided to just go with a donkey and a pack saddle. The cart limited them to roads, and with a civil war brewing, odds were they'd have to take advantage of Brehan's woodlore to avoid attention from unwanted parties.

Brehan and Leliana ranged ahead. From time to time one or both would come back with a report. The sun was directly above on their fifth day out when they both headed in her direction. "We need to get off the road," Leliana said. "Soldiers coming this way. Loghain's men."

Saitada nodded. "Which direction is best?"

"North," Brehan said, pointing. "There is a valley, a mile or so in. My clan would camp there when moving through this area."

She nodded, and gave the signal. "How many soldiers?"

"A couple hundred. A few more than I care to tangle with," Brehan said, shrugging one shoulder. "We can make camp, wait a couple hours, then circle around and avoid them."

"Good plan. See if you can find us some dinner?"

#

"Here, look at this. Do you know what this is?"

"Your new weapon of choice?" Cathiel teased, looking at the dried rose.

"Yes, that's right. Watch as I thrash our enemies with the mighty power of floral arrangements! Feel my thorns, darkspawn! I will overpower you with my rosy scent!" He gave her an amused look. "Or, you know, it could just be a rose. I know that's pretty dull in comparison."

"Sentiment can be a pretty potent weapon."

He looked at her, his face odd. "Is it that easy to see right through me?" He shook his head and smiled. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I picked it in Lothing. I remember thinking, 'How could something so beautiful exist in a place with so much despair and ugliness?' I probably should have left it alone, but I couldn't. The darkspawn would come and their taint would just destroy it. So I've had it ever since."

She smiled at the dried bloom. "That's a nice sentiment."

He looked at it a moment, then looked back at her. "I thought that I might... give it to you, actually. In a lot of ways, I think the same thing when I look at you."

He stood before her, his face earnest and open. She couldn't help herself. "Feeling a little thorny, are we?"

He broke into laughter. "Wow. 'She'll never see through that,' I told myself. Boy was I wrong."

She took the rose, and sniffed it before looking back to him. "Thank you, Alistair. That's a lovely thought."

"I'm glad you like it. I was just thinking... here I am doing all this complaining, and you haven't exactly been having a good time of it yourself. You've had none of the good experience of being a Grey Warden since your Joining, barely a word of thanks or congratulation. It's been a lot of death and fighting and tragedy." He shifted awkwardly. "I thought maybe I could say something. Tell you what a rare and wonderful thing you are to find amidst all this... darkness."

"I feel the same way about you," she said, laying a hand on his arm.

"I'm glad you like it. Now..." He waggled his eyebrows. "If we could move right on past this awkward, embarrassing stage and get right to the steamy bits, I'd appreciate it."

She laughed. "And you were doing so well, too."

"Oh? Your loss, then. All the ladies go on and on about how suave I am. I don't know how you can resist me like you do." He laid a hand over his heart. He looked up. "Oh, look, is that a cloud? I expect rain. Ho-hum."

"You're so cute when you're bashful."

"I'll be..." He laughed. "I'll be standing over here. Until the blushing stops. Just to be, uh, safe. You know how it is." He moved away, stumbling a bit as he practically fled.

She smiled, and tucked the rose away carefully into her pack.

#

"I heard that in Orlais, minstrels are often spies."

"Where did you hear this?" Leliana asked, her tone slightly guarded.

"A book, in the Redcliffe library." Brehan raised an eyebrow at her.

"And you did not think that this could be historical fact, and no longer true?" She laughed, and then shrugged before giving him a cautious look. "Not all minstrels are spies, most are just singers and storytellers. But some of them are... are what we call bards."

"And the bards are spies?"

"Bards are minstrels, and more. Spies, as you say. Some say there is a bard order, but I don't think this is true. Many bards work alone, or in small groups, doing the bidding of a patron who pays for their services. If there is an organization behind it all, no one knows who they are."

"Patron? What sort of patron?"

"Nobles, mostly. In Orlais there is much rivalry amongst the high-born. They fight over land, influence, and the favor of the empress." She rolled her eyes. "But they cannot do this openly, because it is impolite, and in public they wear smiling faces and pretend to be civil. In secret they plot and scheme to destroy each other. It is a game completely meaningless to anyone but its players."

"You were a bard, weren't you?" he asked quietly.

She sighed. "I have revealed too much, it seems. But it doesn't matter what I used to be. It is the past."

"But why were you living a cloistered sister in rural Ferelden?"

"I..." He saw a cloud come over her eyes, and realized she was about to lie to him. "Found myself in Ferelden and sheltered from bad weather in the Chantry. And when the storm passed I just... did not want to leave." The cloud vanished as though it had never been. "I like to say the Maker brought me here."

"Perhaps."

"Do you believe in the Maker?"

He touched the tattoos on his face. "Do you know of the Vallaslin?"

"I know it is called blood-writing, but that is all."

"When we Dalish reach adulthood, we meditate, and choose

which of the Creators calls us the most strongly."

"Which are yours?"

"Dirthamen." He folded his arms. "Tamlen's Vallaslin was of Falon'din. Dirthamen and Falon'din were twins. Dirthamen is the keeper of lore, god of secrets and knowledge."

"And Falon'din was..." Leliana concentrated. "The guide to the beyond?"

"The friend of the dead, yes. You were listening."

She smiled, then sighed. "Was Tamlen your brother?"

"In every way save being born of the same parents."

"I am sorry."

He nodded, then gave her a considering look. "Can you teach me to be a bard?"

"Hmmm... there's an idea. I've watched you, and I do think you'd find some of my skills quite easy to pick up."

"If I am to navigate the world of humans, it seems they would be useful skills."

#

Alistair sensed someone approaching. He turned, expecting to see Cathiel. He blinked when Jerath nodded at him. "Er..."

hello."

"You were a templar."

"Well, yes. I didn't take the vows, but well, yes." Alistair gave him a wary look. "Why?"

"Can you teach me?"

"I suppose I could..." He frowned. "When the grand cleric let Duncan recruit me, she made me swear never to reveal templar secrets outside of the Chantry. I'd rather not go back on my word." He shuffled his feet when Jerath raised an eyebrow. "You don't need templar secrets to defeat the darkspawn."

"I'll respect your word." He turned and started to walk away.

Alistair blinked, and then sighed. "Wait." Jerath turned back around. Alistair ran a hand through his hair. "This is not something small you're asking."

"Neither is defeating a blight."

"It won't be easy."

"If it were easy, someone else would do it."

Alistair snorted. "True enough." He looked at the other man for a moment, and then nodded. "Okay. That move you did, the feint where you switched your grip and... okay, you help me be a better fighter, I'll teach you templar tricks." He

shrugged. "We don't have any lyrium, so I'm not sure how effective this is going to be, but I can teach you the basics. Not that you'd want to take lyrium. It's addictive."

Jerath nodded. "Get your sword."

"What?" Alistair's widened. "You want to start now?"

"Time grows short."

#

"Denerim." Saitada looked over her shoulder. "We should try to remain somewhat incognito."

Brosca glanced over at Sten, and then at Brehan. "Some of us do kind of stand out in the crowd."

"If they identify us, they identify us, but let's not perform a song and dance routine in the commons about it, shall we?"

"Not even a tasteful one?" Brehan asked. Leliana elbowed him.

Saitada sighed. "Cathiel, shoot him. Alright, what other business do we need to take care of in Denerim?"

Cathiel frowned. "We should resupply as much as we are able. Denerim is still more or less untouched by the Blight."

"Do it." Saitada considered. "Potions and whatever supplies Lenore needs especially. Anything else?"

Brosca put a hand on Jerath's shoulder. Jerath glared at him and moved away. "Get Jerath a pint and a lay? Little duster is almost all grown up now."

Zevran laughed. "Ah yes, the coming of age deflowering."

"Cathiel, shoot them."

Cathiel touched her bow. "I'll also need to pick up more arrows."

Saitada sighed. At least morale was high.

#

Brosca stepped in front of Jerath, blocking him from the path into the market. "Where do you think you are going?"

Jerath pointed at the market and said "Swords."

Brosca shook his head. "Nope, you are coming with us."

Lenore linked her arm through Jerath's with a mischievous smile. He tensed. "Zevran was telling us about a local marvel we simply must explore."

Jerath sighed, and shook his head. "The Pearl."

Brosca grinned. "You've heard of it?"

"I am from Denerim."

Lenore frowned. "I heard they aren't letting anyone into the alienage." She glanced over at Brosca and Zevran. "Maybe we could sneak in..."

"I can get in once it gets dark." He twitched a shoulder and tried to pull free of Lenore. She tightened her grip.

"Well, that's hours away yet," Brosca grinned. "To The Pearl. It's time to get you a woman."

Jerath sighed, shook his head. Lenore giggled, and dragged him along with her after Brosca and Zevran.

#

"You know... maybe this isn't the best time to be thinking about this, but I've something to ask you. Seeing as we're in Denerim now, I'm wondering if we might be able to... look someone up."

"You have a friend here, outside the Grey Wardens?" Cathiel asked.

"I'm not talking about a friend, exactly. And..." He caught he raised eyebrow, and shook his head. "No, it's not that sort of friend, either. The thing is, I have a sister. A half-sister. I told you about my mother, right? She was a servant at Redcliffe Castle, and she and she had a daughter... only I never knew about her." He sighed. "I don't think she knew about me, either. They kept my birth a secret, after all. But after I became a Grey Warden I did some checking and... well, I

found out she's still alive. In Denerim."

"That's wonderful news," Cathiel told him.

"She's the only real family I have left, the only family not also mixed up in the whole royal thing. I've just been thinking that..." He ran his fingers through his hair anxiously. "Maybe it's time I went to see her." He shifted hesitantly. "With the Blight coming and everything, I don't know if I'll ever get another chance to see her. Maybe I can help her, warn her about the danger, I don't know."

"If you want to, we could try."

Alistair smiled. "Could we? I'd appreciate that. If something happened to her and I never went to at least see her, I don't know if I could forgive myself. Her name is Goldanna and I think she remarried but still lives just outside the Alienage. If we're in the area, then... well, it's worth a look."

"Let's go."

"Now?"

"Might as well."

#

Brosca gave a low whistle when they entered the Pearl. "Nice place. So, what'll it be?" He waggled his eyebrows at Jerath.

Jerath gave him a look, and Lenore giggled. Zevran tapped

his lip thoughtfully. "Something sweet and innocent? Or experienced and skilled?"

Brosca grinned. "Bah, this little blighter saved all our necks. Let's get him both."

Zevran's smile widened in approval. "I like the way you think. Come, let us check out the merchandise. Only the best for our friend."

Lenore dragged Jerath to a table and sat him down. "Stay here," she admonished. She glanced around, taking in the room, and observed, "look, violence. You watch, we'll be right back."

Jerath rolled his eyes, and then nodded in resignation. She took a few steps and saw him start to stand up. She immediately pushed him back into the chair. "Stay." She glanced at a tall man. "You. I'll give you two silvers if you don't let him run off."

The man grinned and nodded. Jerath put his head on the table and sighed.

Brosca glanced up at Lenore joined them. "This place seems to have it all. Elves, dwarves, humans... Jerath does prefer girls, right?"

Lenore pondered a moment. "I think so. He does seem to like Morrigan's outfit."

Zevran nodded. "Baby steps, we can induct him into more interesting depravities later."

The proprietress, Sanga, smiled, "shopping for a friend? I can bring a few out, let you decide."

Lenore grinned. "Perfect."

They put their heads together and discussed options.

Brosca smiled. "So, we agree then? The blonde?"

Zevran nodded. "Sweet and innocent in appearance, and highly recommended."

"Should we arrange a bottle of wine as well?" Lenore asked.

Zevran nodded, "a tasteful red, I think. Something on the robust side, for contrast."

Brosca handed Sanga a few coins. "Alright... hey, where'd he go?"

Lenore glanced around, "oh, there he is. He found a card game."

Zevran looked in the direction she pointed, and started laughing as he walked over.

#

The woman Jerath was playing cards with looked up as they

approached. "And look who we have here. Come to apologize for leaving me bereft of my lord husband and then vanishing without a trace?"

Zevran gave her a small bow. "You know it was just business, Isabela. Business that turned out well for you, I see - you inherited the ship, I take it?"

"Hmph." She shrugged. "I suppose I never did like the greasy bastard. And the Siren treats me far better than she ever did him."

Lenore smiled, "You two know each other?"

Zevran nodded. "Indeed. This is Isabela, queen of the eastern seas and the sharpest blade in Llomerryn. And Isabela, my dear, you will no doubt be amused to discover that I am traveling with Grey Wardens.

Isabela glanced over at Jerath before turning her gaze to Brosca and Lenore. "Grey Wardens? Charmed."

Lenore grinned, 'so you are the captain of a ship?"

Isabela's face was proud. "Yes. The Siren's Call - my pride and joy. She's seen me from my own Rivain and the isle of Llomerryn to the coast of Par Vollen. All I need is my ship, and the wind at my back. And once my men have had their fill of the pleasures of dry land, we will be off again. We are getting as far away from this Blight as possible."

She glanced over at Jerath, and gave a sigh. "I suppose I owe you a dueling lesson then. I think you were cheating."

Jerath gave a slight smile, "so were you."

"Fast hands. Could I entice you to leave your Order and sign up as one of my crewman? I could use those hands at my... helm."

He shook his head. "I don't know anything about sailing."

"The ship is the best teacher. She will guide you with her sighs... her shudders, her gentle swaying as she rides the crests of the waves. When you become one with her... instinct takes over."

Lenore grinned broadly, "ooooh, shivery."

Jerath twitched a shoulder, and then glanced at his companions. "I think Brosca could benefit more from your lesson than I could. I am accustomed to doing battle a particular way."

Isabela gave Brosca a once over. "It will take you years of practice to achieve true mastery of the style, but I can teach you the basics. I do, however, wish to get to know my potential student better."

Brosca grinned. "Perhaps we could visit your ship. I'd love to see what's below deck."

Isabela smiled slowly. "Ooh, and now you've piqued my

interest. It would surely be rude of me to decline such a... delicious offer. And what about you, Zev? Shall we, for old times' sake?"

"Oh, Isabela, you and your ridiculous appetites... perhaps we should leave it up to our friend here?"

Brosca grinned and took Lenore's hand. "The more the merrier."

"Ah, this brings back memories... Come, my ship is down by the docks, and I am sure you will find my cabins quite... comfortable."

#

Denerim's market was bustling. To half the people here, the Blight was still little more than a rumor. She sighed. If Denerim didn't see to its fortifications soon, the city was going to be in dire trouble.

Saitada stopped suddenly. Sten narrowly avoided tripping over her, redirecting his balance with something a bit less than grace. She listened again over the din of the marketplace. There. She walked quickly towards the other side of the market.

A dwarf, dressed in surfacer clothing, was standing in front of a market stall. "Dwarven crafts! Fine dwarven -" He saw her. "My lady! My Lady Aeducan? Is-is that really you?"

She grinned as she walked towards him. He stared at her a moment, then hugged her. "I knew you survived. I never stopped believing it. And neither did your father."

She introduced Sten, and they talked, filling each other in on the last few months. Her father's death hurt, but it was not unexpected news. Gorim sighed. "Before I left for the surface, King Endrin sent for me. It was almost more than I could endure, seeing him so. As if he were long dead and rotten, and now merely an empty husk collapsing in on itself. He could not even rise from his bed, and the room stank of decay." He shook his head and sighed again. "He asked me... to give you the Shield of Aeducan. And this letter."

"The shield..." She caressed it, and sighed. Memories seemed to reflect in its polished surface. "I had almost forgotten about it."

"I have carried them with me since I left Orzammar. As angry as I once was with the king, when I saw him that final time..." He sighed. "I pitied him. His eyes have haunted me since. If it were possible for a man to die of regret, I think King Endrin did." For a moment, they stood there in silence. He shook his head, then managed a smile. "But... we shouldn't dwell on the past. I can hardly tell you how good it is to see you alive."

"I can't believe I've found you here of all places."

"Aye." He gestured to the shop. "And far happier in my exile than I ever expected to be."

"I'm glad you're happy."

"And you?"

She sighed. "Not until the villain who killed Duncan is dead."

"Then I wish you all fortune." He laughed. "My life has been far less dramatic. I-" He shrugged. "I have married into a surface family. My wife is the daughter of the best smith in Denerim. We're... expecting our firstborn before the spring," he said proudly.

"Gorim Saelec, a merchant. It's hard to believe it." She shook her head. "Well, when can I meet the lucky girl?"

"I would love to introduce you. But you must have more important business than hearing about me."

"Well, I've got to thump sense into some nobles, upset a regency, locate a long lost relic, and stop a blight. Business as usual, I suppose."

Gorim laughed. "Have a look at my father-in-law's crafts. All fine work, and I'll cut you a discount."

Sten nodded to Gorim. "Kadan, we need to find the others."

Saitada nodded. "I'll be back. We can catch up later."

Gorim nodded.

Isabela grinned at Lenore before raising an eyebrow at Brosca. "She's quite feisty, isn't she?"

Brosca smiled, "she bites too."

Lenore laughed. "I do not!"

Isabela ran a hand down Lenore's arm before addressing Zevran. "Well, that brings back memories, doesn't it, Zev? Pleasant ones even."

Zevran leaned against the wall and laughed. "For you, maybe. I still remember the time your husband tried to kill me. I had to flee across the rooftops completely unclothed."

"Ah, yes... those pleasant memories. Now, wasn't there something you wanted from me? The lesson your friend won, perhaps?"

Lenore blinked, then shook her head and looked around the room. "Hey, where did Jerath go?"

Brosca laughed. "Why that little... well, at least the outmaneuvering was enjoyable. Alright, let's have this lesson."

"Come, we will need some space for this."

#

Leliana smiled at Brehan. Between the crowds and the stares he was getting, he was clearly uncomfortable in the city. She considered a moment, and then led him to the Chantry. It was

quieter there, in the Chantry garden, and he seemed to relax a little. He met her eyes, and shrugged. "What do you know of this place?" he asked.

"Denerim is Ferelden's most important city, yes? This is the seat of power, the jewel in the crown of a king." She looked around. "She is Ferelden's heart - her walls are strong, but within them lies so much beauty. Just like the country and the people."

He smiled at her. "It's... loud."

She giggled. "Look, see that woman there. Look at her dress."

"It's green."

"No, really look at it. The color is subdued, but look at the cut and fit. It's well made. She is no noble, but is a woman of wealth, who can afford good clothing, but also a woman who must still work, and so there are few frills."

He narrowed his eyes, and then nodded. "That one." He glanced at her, and then looked back over. "Colorful. Wants to be seen, but the clothing isn't fine. Wants to draw attention to himself. The armor is scuffed, the sword used. Mercenary. And dangerous."

"He is. A crimson oar. I will make a bard of you yet."

"That one."

"Which one?"

He pointed at the ground again. "The one that was here before us."

She narrowed her eyes. "How can I judge if I can't see them."

He knelt, and sketched the track in the air. "A heeled boot, narrow at the toe. Weight forward, but not moving quickly. Well worn, shaped to the feet. A bit of loose stitching on the side of the right boot."

"A woman, down on her luck. But competent, a fighter. Perhaps come to the Chantry to view the board for a job?"

He gestured at a group of women standing near the door. "Which one?"

"I can't see their boots from here."

"You don't need to see the shoes, you saw the tracks."

She nodded. "The blond."

He considered, then nodded. "She'd be my guess as well. I'll make a tracker out of you yet."

#

Sten glanced back once over his shoulder as he followed Saitada towards the alienage. "What does it mean, he was your second back in Orzammar?"

Saitada frowned thoughtfully. "Well, I suppose you could say... huh... I guess you could say in some ways you or Jerath would be my seconds now, the people I count on to have my back and to tell me when I'm being an idiot."

Sten's mouth gave the briefest twist of a smile. "And he walked away from that duty?"

Saitada shook her head. "No. It wasn't that way. If anything, I released him from that duty. I'm glad he's made a home for himself here."

"You two were..."

Saitada shrugged. "We were friends. We were fond of each other. If his wife makes him happy, then I will love her as a sister."

"That is a most sensible way of viewing the situation."

"That's me. The sensible one."

"It occurs to me your life would not change much by embracing the Qun."

"Is this the recruitment speech, Sten?"

"An observation."

"There is something to be said for certainty and borders. But we have those in Orzammar as well, and the result was the casteless. You have...what was it, Tal'Vashoth?"

"Yes"

"Why do the Tal-Vashoth fight you?"

"Isn't it the nature of a wound to bleed? I have no more answers than you. Why do we fight the darkspawn? Why do the darkspawn fight us?"

"Don't the Tal-Vashoth give reasons?"

"Now and then. Do the reasons matter? It makes little difference to those they fight. Tell me, then: Why do you fight?"

"To defend my people."

"In the antaam, we are told of the enemy: Assume he loves as you love, hates as you hate, and fights just as hard as you. It's a lie, of course. But does that matter, so long as you stand, and believe you know your enemy? The Tal-Vashoth wish us dead. And we wish to go on living. The point of our war is war."

"Tell me then, what would happen if your people came to Orzammar?" Sten appeared startled at Saitada's question. "It's not always a lie, Sten. Maybe the Tal-Vashoth have a point."

"Undoubtedly. They've used it to kill countless people."

Saitada raised an eyebrow at him. "You don't think they have any justification?"

"No. But they don't care what I think. Do you think all your Deshyrs are justified in their actions?"

"No, not all of them. But some of them, yes." She sighed. "I didn't mean to offend you by speaking of this."

"I have no feelings you can hurt, Warden."

Saitada raised an eyebrow at Sten. "Odd"

"What is odd?"

"In all the time now that we've known each other, I believe that is the first time you haven't actually been honest with me."

Sten frowned. "There are times when words fail."

"Indeed. I've often found it better to judge by actions rather than words."

"There are times, kadan, it seems you come very close to wisdom."

"And there are times, salroka, it seems you come very close to humor."

#

Saitada almost didn't notice when Jerath quietly joined their group. She spared a glance for the small dog at Jerath's heels. "I thought Brosca and Lenore dragged you off."

"They ran into an old friend of Zevran's. I decided to let them all get acquainted."

Saitada nodded. "Brother Genitivi's house is near the entrance to the alienage."

"That would be this way, then." Jerath pointed.

Sten and Saitada followed him through the market to a row of neatly appointed houses. Saitada nodded. "This one, I think." She rapped lightly on the door. There was no answer. She knocked again. She frowned. "What do you think?" she asked Jerath.

He tried the knob. The door opened. She gave him an annoyed look, and walked inside.

#

A man came out of a back room. He started when he saw them. "Yes? What are you doing here?"

"Brother Genitivi, I presume?"

"No. No, I am Weylon, Brother Genitivi's assistant. When you first came in I was... was hoping that you had news of Brother Genitivi - wishful thinking, it seems."

"Has something happened to Brother Genitivi?" Saitada narrowed her eyes.

"I haven't seen Brother Genitivi in weeks. He's sent no word;

it's so unlike him. I am afraid something has happened. Genitivi's research into the Urn may have led him into danger."

"Why would searching for the Urn lead him into danger?"

"Perhaps the Urn has been lost for a reason. I pray for Genitivi's safety, but hope dwindles with each passing day. I-I tried to send help, but some knights came from Redcliffe looking for him not long ago. I sent them after Genitivi and they too have disappeared.

Saitada sighed. "I must go after them. I need the Urn for Arl Eamon."

"No, don't ask me where they went." He shook his head, and wrung his hands fretfully. "You'll go after them, and what if ill-luck should befall you, too? This search is a curse, on all of us. Some things are not meant to be found. I know that now."

"I am willing to risk it. Tell me where he went."

"So be it. All he said before he left was that he would be staying at an inn near Lake Calenhad, investigating something in that area."

"What exactly was he investigating?"

"I don't know. All I discovered from going through his research was that he was staying at the inn."

Saitada blinked. Behind her, Jerath spoke. "But you just said he spoke to you and told you that."

"Y-yes, of course he told me, but I also went through his things to see if I could find other clues to his whereabouts."

She watched as Jerath set a hand on his blade. "You sound nervous. Hiding something?"

Weylon looked from Jerath, to where Sten stood next to the door, his arms folded. He looked back at Saitada, then at Jerath again. "That's n-not true. I told you everything I know. Brother Genitivi told us - t-told me about the inn and that's all!"

"Us? Who's 'us?'" Saitada asked.

"Us? I mean me. T-there is no us... bah!" He shook his head. "Why do I keep up on this charade? I gave you a chance to turn aside and forget you ever heard of Genitivi and the Urn. But you persisted. Now it has come to this... Andraste forgive me. I do this in Your Name!" He drew his blade, and charged.

Saitada set her sword. The man practically ran into it. He staggered backwards, then smile fiercely and came at her again. She cut him down. She shook her head. "Idiot."

"Or smart." She turned and raised an eyebrow at Jerath. He shrugged and gestured at the corpse. "We can't question him now that he's splattered all over the floor."

"Look around. Got to be a clue somewhere. Sten, watch the door."

#

Morrigan resumed her human form to help them search. They found the body of a young man Saitada presumed was the real Weylon.

Jerath handed the journal to Saitada. She skimmed through it quickly. "Haven, in the Frostback Mountains."

"Half a country away." Jerath observed.

Saitada sighed. "We need Eamon. Without him, we have no chance of getting the human armies behind us. We need Ferelden."

Jerath nodded. "By your command."

Something about his voice caused her to raise an eyebrow. Morrigan had gone back into the other room and was looking through the books. Saitada sighed. "It's just us here, Jerath."

He shrugged. "We could back Loghain. Grey Wardens should remain neutral."

"That rockslide has already tumbled, Jerath. Loghain declared war on the Grey Wardens." Saitada sighed, and looked up at him. "You think I am letting my feelings make the decision."

"I think it is possible you have a bias in the matter."

Saitada nodded. "You might be right. However, either way, we could still use Eamon. Either to oppose Loghain, or to get those opposing Loghain to stand down." She glanced at the corpse on the floor. "What do you suppose he meant, he does

this in Andraste's name?"

"Perhaps Leliana would have some insight there."

"Maybe. Let's get going." She stopped, and glanced at him.
"Did you need to visit anyone?"

"The Alienage is closed. I could break in, but... if there is trouble..." he sighed. "No."

"Let's find the others. Where did you leave Brosca and Lenore?"

"At a brothel."

"At a..." she laughed. "By the Stone." She glanced at Jerath out of the corner of her eye. "You could have stayed."

He twitched a shoulder. "I've had better stew."

"That's not the only thing they serve at brothels, you know."

"I hear they also polish anvils."

"Yes..."

"And pudding peaches."

"Right..."

"And dampen divines."

"I'll stop if you will."

"Deal."

#

Alistair stared at the door of a small house, barely more than a hovel. "That's... my sister's house. I'm almost sure of it, this is... yes, this is the right address. She could be inside. Could we... go and see?" He shuffled his feet, fidgeting anxiously.

Cathiel glanced at him. "Wouldn't you rather meet her on your own?"

"Do I seem a little nervous?" He looked down at himself, then sighed. "I am. I really don't know what to expect. I'd like you to be there with me, if you're willing. Or we could... leave, I suppose. We really don't have time to pay a visit, do we? Maybe we should go."

Cathiel started walking to the door. "Fine, let's see if she's home."

"Will she even know who I am? Does she even know I exist? My sister. That sounds very strange... "sister." "Siiiiisster." Hmmm... Now I'm babbling. Maybe we should go. Let's go. Let's just... go."

He stopped talking when she knocked on the door. A voice inside yelled for them to enter. She glanced once at Alistair, then opened the door.

Inside, they looked around. The place was small and cramped, but clean. Alistair inhaled, then called out, "Err... hello?"

A woman in worn clothing came in, her strawberry blonde hair graying around the temples. "You have linens to wash? I charge three bits on the bundle, you won't find better. And don't trust what that Natalia woman tells you either, she's foreign and she'll rob you blind."

"I'm..." Alistair looked at Cathiel, and she gave him an encouraging smile. "Not here to have any wash done. My name's Alistair. I'm... well, this may sound sort of strange, but are you Goldanna?" He spread his hands a little and shrugged. "If so, I suppose I'm your brother."

She stared. "My what? I am Goldanna, yes... how do you know my name? What kind of tomfoolery are you folk up to?"

"Are you sure your information was correct, Alistair?" Cathiel asked, noting the rather shocked look on his face.

"Yes, I... I think so. I'm sure of it, in fact." He turned back to the woman. "Look, our mother... she worked as a servant in Redcliffe Castle a long time ago, before she died. Do you know about that? She-"

"You! I knew it! They told me you was dead! They told me the babe was dead along with mother, but I knew they was lying!"

"They told you I was dead? Who? Who told you that?"

"Them's at the castle! I told them the babe was the king's, and they said he was dead. Gave me a coin to shut my mouth and sent me on my way! I knew it!"

"I'm sorry, I... didn't know that. The babe didn't die. I'm him; I'm... your brother."

Goldanna scoffed angrily. "For all the good it does me!" Her face became accusatory. "You killed Mother, you did, and I've had to scrape by all this time? That coin didn't last long, and when I went back they ran me off!"

Cathiel saw Alistair's face become stricken, and she frowned at the woman. "That's hardly Alistair's fault, is it?"

Goldanna sneered at her. "And who in the Maker's name are you? Some tart, following after his riches, I expect?"

"Hey!" Alistair folded his arms and glared. "Don't speak to her that way! She's my friend, and a Grey Warden! Just like me!"

"Ooohhh, I see." Goldanna gave a mocking laugh. "A prince and a Grey Warden, too. Well, who am I to think poorly of someone so high and mighty compared to me?" She made a shooing gesture. "I don't know you, boy. Your royal father forced himself on my mother and took her away from me, and what do I got to show for it? Nothing. They tricked me good! I should have told everyone! I got five mouths to feed, and unless you can help with that, I got less than no use for you."

"I... I'm sorry, I... I don't know what to say..."

"Goldanna, Alistair came here hoping to find his family."

"Well... so he's found it. I'm his sister. But what are you to me, boy, except the one who took my mother away, hmm?"

"You think I wished her dead? I never wanted that. I didn't have the life you think I did, Goldanna."

"I suppose not. A bastard is still a bastard, isn't he? But... brother or no, I've got five mouths to feed and no time to spare until they are."

Alistair ran a hand through his hair. "Then let me promise you this, Goldanna: I'll do whatever I can, speak to whomever I can, to ensure you and your children are taken care of."

She just smirked at him and shook her head. "Mmm. That sounds all well and fine, but you'll have to forgive me if I don't exactly hold my breath."

"You have my promise. I can't give you more than that. I... let's go. I want to go. Goodbye, Sister."

Cathiel followed him out of the house.

#

Outside, they walked almost to the Chantry gate before Alistair stopped. Cathiel laid a hand on his arm, and he turned towards her. "Well that was... not what I expected. To put it lightly. I'll live up to my promise, I suppose, but... this is the family I've been wondering about all my life?" He shook his

head. "I can't believe it. I... I guess I was expecting her to accept me without question. Isn't that what family is supposed to do? I... I feel like a complete idiot."

Cathiel gave him a hug. "Everyone is out for themselves. You should learn that."

"Yes." He returned the hug, then smiled at her. "I suppose you're right. I should."

"Besides, you don't need her. You have others who care for you."

"Such as? The only person who ever cared about me was Duncan. And he's gone."

"You have friends, Alistair. I'm one of them. I care about you."

"I... I thank you. I'm glad you came with me. Let's just go. I don't want to talk about this anymore."

#

Saitada glanced around at the others. She assumed the raven sitting on Jerath's shoulder was Morrigan. "We have a few leads."

"This should be good," Zevran said.

"First off, we have a chance to go learn a few things about Loghain's troop movements, and possibly acquire an ally. Brosca, take Zevran and Lenore, and go see if you can lend

Bann Telmen a hand. Brehan, Leliana, there is a missing caravan near Redcliffe, belonging to one Arl Bryland. We could use his support, see what you can find. Jerath, Morrigan, some soldiers went missing south of Redcliffe. My guess is darkspawn, and you two are the most mobile. Scout and report back. The rest of you, we are heading to Lake Calenhad to scout the trail of Brother Genetivi. Odds are, it's a trap, so expect trouble. All of you, meet me back in Redcliffe as soon as you are finished. If I'm not back yet, report to Teagan and do what you can to help him shore up Redcliffe."

"Yes, oh fearless leader," Brosca said.

35. Chapter 35

"Don't you ever talk?" Alistair said to Sten as they left Denerim behind. "You know, make polite conversation just to put people at ease?"

"You mean that I should remark upon the weather before I cut off a man's head?"

"Nevermind."

Saitada snickered, and she saw the corner of Sten's mouth twitch just slightly. They'd gone about five minutes more before Alistair tried again. "Were you really in that cage for twenty days?"

"It might have been closer to thirty. I stopped counting after a while."

"What did you do? I mean... twenty days is a long time to sit in one place and do nothing."

"On good days, I posed riddles to the passerby, offering them treasures in exchange for answers."

"Really?"

"No."

"Awww..." Alistair sounded genuinely disappointed. "Too bad. That's got serious potential."

Cathiel laughed.

They ate on the move. Saitada thought she actually heard Cathiel say something about missing Brehan. The Dalish man certainly did know how to find a comfortable camp. She noted a curious expression on Wynne's face as the woman glanced at Alistair.

Alistair caught it too. "Why are you smiling like that? You look suspiciously like the cat who swallowed the pigeon."

"Canary."

"What?"

"I look like the cat that swallowed the canary."

Alistair shook his head. "I once had a very large cat, but that's not my point. My point is why are you smirking?"

Wynne chuckled, and glanced sideways at Cathiel. "You were watching her. With great interest, I might add. In fact, I believe you were...enraptured."

"She's um... a noblewoman. I look to her for guidance."

"Oh, I see. So what guidance did you find in those swaying hips hmm?"

"No no, I wasn't looking at... you know her... hind-quarters"

"Certainly."

"I gazed...glanced, in that direction, maybe, but I wasn't staring...or really seeing anything even."

"Of course."

"I hate you. You're a bad person."

Saitada exchanged a glance with Sten, and sighed. At least morale was high.

#

They made camp quickly. Brehan set fish onto a hot stone, and left them to cook. He saw Leliana make herself comfortable, and smiled. He set the flowers he'd found earlier next to her. She blinked. "Flowers? For me? Oh... they're beautiful."

"Smell them."

She held them to her nose, and her eyes widened. She sniffed again, and tears came to her eyes. "These were..." She buried her face in them for a moment before looking back up at him. "These were her favorite. Oh, I haven't seen these in such a long time. They smell just like mother used to." Her smile trembled. "Thank you... thank you so much for remembering."

He nodded, and went back to finish tending to dinner. He saw her shoot him a sidelong glance as they ate. She let out a breath. "I lied to you, you know?" She sighed. "About why I left Orlais."

He smiled. "I knew you weren't telling me something."

She drew her knees in, and touched the flowers before looking back at him. "I didn't feel like talking about it then. What happened to me... maybe it will affect us, maybe not, but you should know." She drew a deep breath. "I came to Ferelden and the Chantry because I was being hunted, in Orlais."

That wasn't what he'd expected to hear. "Hunted? What for?"

"I was framed, betrayed by someone I thought I knew and could trust. Marjolaine - she was my mentor... and friend." She took one of the flowers, and played with the stem, twining it around her fingers. "She taught me the bardic arts - how to enchant with words and song, to carry myself like a high-born lady, to blend in as a servant... The skills I learned I used to serve her, my bard-master, because I loved her, and because I enjoyed what I did."

He raised an eyebrow. "You loved her?" He felt a mild pang. It just figured, didn't it? He finally found a woman he really liked, and she... He just barely managed to keep himself from sighing.

"She was a remarkable woman. I cannot fully express the

admiration I had for her, or the depth of my affection." Her gaze became distant. "I thought I knew her. My devotion to her blinded me to her... less than noble attributes." She shook her head. "You can say it was my fault. There was a man I was sent to kill. I was to bring Marjolaine everything he carried. I don't know who this man was. She gave me a name and a description, and I hunted him down. I found documents on his body - sealed documents."

"You opened them, didn't you?" He couldn't blame her. In her place, he would likely have done the same.

"My curiosity got the better of me. Something told me that I needed to know what was in those letters." Her voice grew sad. "Marjolaine... had been selling all kinds of information about Orlais to other countries - Nevarra and Antiva, among others. It was treason."

"Isn't that what bards do?"

"Some. But I had always assumed that Marjolaine only operated within Orlais. This was an unhappy surprise for me. My life as a bard taught me that my loyalties should be kept fluid. My concern was not that she was a traitor, but that her life would be in danger if she was caught."

He nodded. "Most countries don't appreciate treason."

She sniffed the flower again, and began braiding the stem into a ring. "I should have left well alone, but I didn't. I had to tell Marjolaine I feared for her life. She brushed aside my

concern. She admitted her guilt, but said it was in the past. That is why the documents had to be destroyed, she said." The old pain showed on her face, the hurt in her voice. "I believed her. I kept believing, up till the moment they showed me the documents, altered by her hand to make me look the traitor."

His voice was soft and sympathetic. "She betrayed you?"

"Yes..." She sat for a moment in silence. He added another stick to the fire. "The Orlesian guards. They captured me... did terrible things to make me confess and reveal my conspirators. It was a traitor's punishment I endured, and at the end of it, all that awaited me was eternity in an unmarked grave."

"How did you get out?"

She gave a wry smile. "The skills Marjolaine taught me were good for something, at least. I broke free when I saw the opportunity." Her gaze became distant again. "I did not seek Marjolaine out. If she thought I was coming for her, she would have me caught again."

"And so you came to Ferelden, to Lothering."

"I was tempted to confront her; I was furious, betrayed, but what could I do against her? And so I fled, to Ferelden, to the Chantry and the Maker. Ferelden protected my person, and the Maker saved my soul." Her voice grew serious. "And that is the reason I am here. The real reason. No more lies

between us, at least in this."

He added another stick to the fire. "You will be safe in my company."

"It feels good to have this off my chest. Thank you for listening, and understanding."

#

Jerath watched as Morrigan built a small fire. Neither of them had bothered with tents. He gave her a contemplative look. "Life in the Wilds must have been very lonely."

"At times, perhaps. A world full of people and buildings and things was all very foreign to me. If I wished companionship, I ran with the wolves and flew with the birds. If I spoke, 'twas to the trees." Her smile was fond, her voice wistful.

He leaned back, looking up at the stars. "That sounds wonderful."

"For a time. But one can only remain a child for so long. I recall the first time I crept beyond the edge of the Wilds. I did so in animal form, remaining in the shadows and watching these strange townsfolk from afar." She used her magic to light the fire, then sat down across from him. "I happened upon a noblewoman by her carriage, adorned in sparkling garments the likes of which I had never before seen. I was dazzled. This, to me, seemed what true wealth and beauty must be." She shook her head. "I snuck up behind her and

stole a hand mirror from the carriage. 'Twas encrusted in gold and crystalline gemstones and I hugged it to my chest with delight as I sped back to the Wilds."

He tilted his head to one side thoughtfully. "I can't imagine Flemeth was pleased."

"She was not," Morrigan said flatly. "Flemeth was furious with me. I was a child and had not yet come into my full power, and I had risked discovery for the sake of a pretty bauble. To teach me a lesson, Flemeth took the mirror and smashed it upon the ground. I was heartbroken."

A memory sprang to his mind. A ruby necklace in a silk kerchief, and his mother's look of horror when he'd presented it to her. Still, his mother had been kind when she'd told him how dangerous his actions had been. "But you were just a child."

She shrugged. "And a foolish one. Flemeth was right to break me of my fascination." Her voice became harsh. "Beauty and love are fleeting and have no meaning. Survival has meaning. Power has meaning." She looked across the fire at him. "Without those lessons I would not be here today, as difficult as they might have been."

He sought the place in his mind where the rage used to dwell. It was still odd, finding silence there. But the lessons remained. "They made you stronger, didn't they?"

"They did, indeed." She gazed into the flames. "To return to

your original question, perhaps my time in the Wilds was indeed lonely. But such was how it had to be." She waved a hand. "I find myself at times wondering what might have become of the girl with the beautiful, golden mirror... but such fantasies have no place amidst reality."

#

"I've a question, if I may."

Lenore smiled at Zevran. "Go ahead."

He looked over at her and Brosca. "Well here is the thing: I swore an oath to serve you, yes? And I understand the quest you're on and this is all very fine and well. My question pertains to what you intend to do with me once this business is over with." He shrugged. "As a point of curiosity."

"You could go, if you wanted," Lenore said. Brosca nodded.

"Could I?" He cocked his head to one side. "And if I didn't wish to leave?"

Lenore laughed. "There's always a use or two for a handsome elf."

He raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "I'm sure that I could come up with a few more, if pressed." His voice became cheerful. "It is good to know what my options might be. But that is for another time. For now, we have much to do, yes?"

#

She watched the others around the fire. Sten busied himself with tending to his armor. Griffon sat next to the qunari, and she was surprised to see the big man appeared to be actually holding a conversation with the hound.

Wynne sat down next to her. "So tell me, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

Saitada shrugged. "I was cast out to die in the Deep Roads, and found Duncan there."

Wynne raised an eyebrow. "You survived the Deep Roads and the darkspawn that dwell there? Truly, you were born to be a Grey Warden."

"I prefer this life. I can sleep more soundly, it seems. Being exiled has given me a freedom I never had before. Orzammar has forgotten me, but I will protect her."

Wynne gave her a contemplative look. "Sometimes it gives me comfort to think that everything will end up the way it's supposed to, that it will be alright. You were chosen; you survived the Joining when others did not. Perhaps it was meant to be."

Saitada nodded. "I remember, on the path to Ostagar, telling Duncan that it seemed poetic, that those of us with little left to lose were all that stood between the world and darkness." Her gaze went to where Alistair and Cathiel sat together, giggling over some no doubt terrible joke. "And then, I lost him." She sighed. "I hope they enjoy these moments together."

I fear there is a long road still before us."

#

She looked up to see Sten looking at her, a puzzled expression on his face. "Something wrong?"

"I don't understand. You look like a woman."

She blinked, and looked down at herself. "What's not to understand about that?" On the other side of the camp, she saw a wide eyed Alistair trying not to laugh.

"You are a Grey Warden." He tilted his head to one side. "So it follows that you can't be a woman."

"That..." She furrowed her brow. "Doesn't make any sense, Sten."

"So you understand my confusion, then."

She shook her head and laughed. "Well, I'm confused now, anyway."

"Women are priests, artisans, shopkeepers, or farmers. They don't fight."

"That's not a very comprehensive list."

"The laborers, soldiers, and ashkaari are men. There is nothing else left."

She shook her head. She'd figured out that the Qunari had some kind of caste system, but... "None of this makes any sense, Sten."

"Exactly."

Her head was starting to hurt. Cathiel actually had her hand over Alistair's mouth. "We're going around in circles here."

"I don't know what to make of you. Perhaps this is a quality of Grey Wardens I had not heard about." He held out a hand. "A person is born: qunari, or human, or elven, or dwarf. He doesn't choose that. The size of his hands, whether he is clever or foolish, the land he comes from, the color of his hair: These are beyond his control. We do not choose, we simply are."

She nodded. "But a person can choose what to do."

"Can they?" He gave her a considering look. "We'll see."

#

"Is Flemeth really what she seems to be?"

"Well that depends, does it not? What does she seem to be?" Morrigan raised an eyebrow at him.

Jerath shrugged. "A nutty old bat?"

Morrigan laughed. "Sometimes I do wonder the very same thing. Tell me: how much do you know of the tale? The one

that the Chasind still tell of my mother, to frighten them into obedience?"

"I didn't even know there was such a thing."

"Ah! I see. That does explain much. I can relay what Flemeth once told me, herself. And you can decide whether or not 'tis the truth. If you desire."

"That sounds interesting."

"As the tale is sung by the bards, there was a time when Flemeth was young and beautiful. A fair lass in a land of barbarian men, the desire of any who saw her."

"Just how long ago is this?"

"Many centuries, before this land was even named Ferelden. The tales say that Flemeth fell in love with Osen, the bard, and fled the castle of her husband, the dread Lord Conobar, and that he swore vengeance for her infidelity. In truth, my mother claims that 'twas Osen who was her husband, and Conobar the jealous lord who looked on from afar. Lord Conobar approached young Osen and offered him wealth and power in exchange for his lovely wife. And Osen agreed."

"Flemeth must have been angry."

"The life of a bard is a poor one, and love fades in the wake of hunger. 'Twas Flemeth who suggested the arrangement. All would have been well had Lord Conobar kept his end of the

bargain. But he was a foul man who bargained with coin he did not possess. Osen was led off to a field and slain, left for dead. Flemeth spoke to the spirits and learned of the deed, and sword revenge."

"She spoke to spirits? Or demons?"

"Spirits first, and 'twas they who slew Conobar. Flemeth did not turn to the demon until... much later. Lord Conobar's allies chased Flemeth, you see. Chased her to the Wilds and there she hid. There she found the demon and he made her strong. The legends all speak of the great hero Cormac, he who defeated Flemeth and her great army when she invaded the lowlands centuries later. All lies."

"Which? She never invaded? Or he never defeated her?"

"The truth of the matter is that there never as an invasion. As Flemeth tells it, the Chasind never raised an army under her banner and she never fought with any warrior named Cormac. Cormac led a brutal civil war against his own people, and later claimed it was to vanquish evil that had taken root amongst the lords. Thus he was hailed a hero. Flemeth was only attached to the legend much later. Perhaps 'twas due to the great war with the Chasind that eventually came, but Mother claims not to know how it began."

"Do you believe her version?"

"I do not believe everything Flemeth claims. Oft it seems her bitterness has colored her memories. But on the whole? Yes."

I believe this tale, if not all."

"How is it that Flemeth has survived for so long?"

"The demon within her has transformed her into... something else. An abomination, perhaps some would say. I know not. I only know my mother is clever. And she is part of the Wilds as it is part of her. But she is no immortal. She bleeds. A blade in her heart would kill her like any other, were it luck enough to find her."

"An interesting story. Thank you."

"Dare I ask of your own mother? Few are abominations of legend, 'tis true, but I find myself curious nevertheless."

"I loved her very much. She had a fire in her. Duncan told me he almost recruited her to the wardens once. She was a natural with the blade, and trained me in its use."

"I find myself a little envious, to tell the truth."

He went silent for a moment. "I was still a child when she was murdered."

"You have my sympathies, for what it is worth. Which is very little, I am certain."

#

Brosca glanced at Lenore out of the corner of his eye.
"So...er... you've got a thing for Zevran."

Lenore nodded. "And unless I mistake, which I concede is possible, so do you?"

"Don't that beat all. An elf boy." Brosca shrugged. "So what happens now? We draw straws? Duel? You turn me into a frog?"

Lenore chuckled. "I think you'd probably rig the game, and I never did learn how to do the frog thing." She gave Brosca a thoughtful look.

Brosca shifted uncomfortably. "What?"

"Why fight about it at all?"

"Well I wasn't serious about the duel...that's not what you meant, is it?"

Lenore nodded.

"You mean we... what, share?"

"I do not find the idea distasteful." She grinned impishly. "It certainly was fun playing with Isabela."

"Huh..." Brosca looked at Lenore as if seeing her for the first time. He chuckled. "Well, I can't say I'm necessarily opposed either."

"Well, that settles that then."

Alistair saw Cathiel looking at him with mischief in her eyes.
"Something you need, my dear?"

"If you were raised in the Chantry, have you never...?"

"Never...? Never what? Had a good pair of shoes?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm not sure I do." He gave her a teasing smile. "Have I never seen a basilisk? Ate jellied ham? Have I never licked a lamppost in winter?"

She laughed. "Now you're making fun of me."

"Make fun of you, dear lady? Perish the thought." He elbowed her playfully. "Well, tell me: have you ever licked a lamppost in winter?"

"Why, yes, I've licked a lamppost in winter."

"Just the once? And you didn't lose half of your tongue in the process? I'm impressed." He shrugged. "I, myself, never had the pleasure. Not that I haven't thought about it, of course, but... you know."

She blinked. "Oh, that's so cute. You're a virgin."

"Cute?" He raised an eyebrow. "Well, hearing that from a beautiful woman does make me feel much luckier, I'll say that."

"You think I'm beautiful?" She batted her eyes at him. Griffon bounded around them before running off ahead again.

"Of course you are, and you know it. You're ravishing, resourceful, and all those other things you'd probably hurt me for not saying."

She leaned against him as they walked. "I would never hurt you."

He put his arm around her. "Nor I you."

"You two are just adorable," Wynne said.

Cathiel giggled as Alistair started to blush.

#

Morrigan sat down next to him as they made camp. "I have been studying Mother's grimoire. Do you wish to hear what I have found?"

"What did you find?"

She shifted slightly, her face unsettled. "'Tis... not what I expected. I had hoped for a collection of her spells, a map of the power she commands. But this is not it."

He frowned. "Yet you look disturbed."

She sighed. "Disturbed? Yes, perhaps that is the right word. One thing in particular within her writings disturbs me." She

laid a hand on the book. "Here, in great detail, Flemeth explains the means by which she has survived for centuries."

"A spell of immortality?" There were stories of such things, though none had ever seemed to hold a ring of truth.

"If only 'twere so." She gazed into the fire. "Flemeth has raised many daughters over her long lifetime. There are stories of many Witches of the Wild throughout Chasind legend, yet I have never seen one and always wondered why not." A horrified note crept into her voice. "And now I know. They are all Flemeth. When her body becomes old and wizened, she raises a daughter. And when the time is right, she takes her daughter's body for her own."

He closed his eyes, and then nodded. His eyes met her yellow ones. "So what do you intend to do about it?"

Her eyes were cold. "There is only one possible response to this: Flemeth needs to die." She threw a branch into the fire. "I will not sit about like an empty sack waiting to be filled. Flemeth must be slain." She sighed. "And I need your help to do it."

Five lives. Five favors. A blade. He nodded. "Very well. I'll help you, if I can."

Surprise filled her face, and then relief. "Then what needs to be done is for you to go back to Flemeth's hut in the Korcari Wilds... without me." She shook her head. "If I am present when she is slain, I cannot be certain that she will not be able

to possess my body right then. So I must remain at camp. Confront her and slay her quickly. I doubt she will truly be dead even then, but it will take her years to find a new host and recover her power... if that is even possible." She frowned. "The thing I must have is her true grimoire. With it I can defend against her power in the future. Everything else in her hut is yours."

He twitched a shoulder. "I'll see what I can do."

"I am grateful. The sooner this can be done, the sooner it will set my mind at ease."

"We are already heading in the right direction." He looked at her. "Can you scout for these lost soldiers by yourself?"

"I can shift to a raven, and seek them from the air."

"Then I will head back to the wild in the morning. Meet me at that statue where we camped shortly after visiting Lothing."

"I will."

#

"I enjoy the nights at camp. The night always seems more peaceful, to me. Safer." Leliana lay with her head on her pack, gazing up at the stars.

Brehan smiled. "I know what you mean."

"I feel the night grants us a reprieve from the troubles of the

day. Silly, isn't it? The darkspawn never sleep, and they lurk in the shadows."

"It is not silly to seek moments to lay down your burdens." He had to admit, it was nice just the two of them. With no spawn or other wardens within the range of his senses, the curious hum in the back of his mind faded enough for him to ignore it completely.

She rolled over to look at him. "I enjoy those nights when we stand guard together, talking to pass the time in those small hours... well, I talk and you listen, mostly..." She smiled. "Sometimes I succumb and fall asleep, and wake to find you still watchful and I know you're watching out for me."

"That's what friends do. Look out for each other."

"What I'm trying to say is..." She laid her hand on his arm. "Is that I trust you. I'm comfortable with you. I know you'll be there when I need you." She looked back up at the stars. "You are a wonderful storyteller, and my friend and sometimes I think that maybe we could be more than that... Maker... look at me, stumbling over my words like an ill-educated peasant girl. Some bard I am..."

He laughed. "You're cute when you're embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed. I'm just... flushed because of... of the... heat," she finished lamely.

He laid back, arms folded behind his head. "Someone like you

being interested in me is flattering." The lessons she'd been giving him were fascinating. Humans were actually starting to make something approaching sense.

She tossed a handful of grass at him. "What, are you saying I have bad taste? Why can't I like you? You're a good person, a great listener, a... a remarkable warrior." He snorted. She laughed. "You often show signs of intelligence and you're fairly good looking..." She leaned over and poked him in the cheek. "Most of your facial features are in the right place..."

"Mas serannas. You're so complimentary."

"You're welcome. I try." She sighed. "There... isn't much more I can say. My feelings have been laid bare. You are... very special to me."

"I feel the same way, and I'm glad you do too." Even if they weren't, well, compatible, he did treasure his friendship with the woman.

She sputtered. "Really? N-no one told me. You... you felt the same way and didn't do me the courtesy of informing me?" He blinked as she sat up and glared at him. "Y-you made me say all those things! Why couldn't you have said them first? Oh, you... oh, how very awkward..."

He blinked in confusion. "I thought you were comfortable around me."

"Oh, chivalry is so dead. Making the lady spill her guts like

that..."

"Your spilled guts make me feel loved and accepted," he said, trying to make a joke.

"Yes... I am fond of you and I care about you. I'll take first watch."

He nodded, and went to the tent, more confused than ever.

#

With Brosca on one side and Zevran on the other, the soldiers stood little chance. Lenore decided to go with lightning, just for a change of pace. And so as not to burn Bann Telmen's crops. The man was grateful enough for their help. He had few soldiers, but Brosca was able to negotiate the provision of foodstuffs to help with the refugees trickling into Redcliffe.

They sat at a real table that night, with hot food and half-way decent ale. Zevran shrugged. "I did not thank you. It occurs to me now that you have freed me from the Crows, and yet I did not think to thank you for it. No matter why you did it, still it was done, and I the benefactor. So... thank you."

"We are friends, Zevran," Lenore said. "We were glad to do it."

He actually looked moved. "You say that so quickly, and yet it is an odd thing for me to hear. In the Crows, we do not have 'friends', and yet here you are and I cannot help but consider

you such."

Brosca looked across at Lenore, then back to Zevran. "We might think of you as more than a friend."

"I... must admit that I have thought of..." He blinked. "We?"

"We," Lenore said.

"I simply had no idea you might..." He looked from one to the other, and his expression almost looked relieved. "Feel the same." He laughed. "How very novel."

#

He felt darkspawn at the edge of his senses, and shifted his path slightly to avoid them. Morrigan had tucked several potions into his belt pouch before he'd left. She'd looked for a moment as if she'd wanted to say something, but she'd only wished him good luck. He wished he understood why he was doing this.

Five lives. Five favors. He knew killing her was no way out from under that debt. He wasn't sure killing himself would be a way out from under that debt.

She was standing outside the hut, dressed in mage robes and carrying a staff. Waiting for him. "And so you return." She smiled. "Lovely Morrigan has at last found someone willing to dance to her tune. Such enchanting music she plays, wouldn't you say?"

"I should dance to your tune, instead?"

"Why dance at all? Why not sing?" She laughed, then looked him over. "Something has changed about you, lad. Circles within patterns, forming more circles, and the path begins again. What has Morrigan told you, hmmm? What little plan has she hatched this time?"

"Does it matter? I'm just investigating my options." He knew he was going to kill her. He also knew that it would serve little purpose. She was testing him. Again.

"Composing your own tune, then?" She gave him a pleased smile. "Now there's something even I can dance to." She laughed, then stroked a hand down her staff. "That you have come at all means you desire something. Perhaps I may yet give it to you." Her eyes met his. "Morrigan wishes my grimoire? Take it as a trophy. Tell her I am slain."

"And what happens to you?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "I go. Perhaps I surprise Morrigan one day..." Her eyes became contemplative as she looked him over once more. "Or I may simply watch." She shrugged. "It would be interesting to see what she does with her freedom. Enlightening even. Would you give an old woman that?"

"You are not simply an old woman."

"Nor were you simply a young man, the first time you came to

my door." Her smile was slow and predatory. "Nor are you simply a young man now. Circles and choices, and little is as chance as it would seem. Walk with me."

He fell into step beside her as they walked to a small hill. She gestured. "It was here I met the boy who would become King Maric. Led through the woods by a farmer's son, the man who now holds the crown. I warned Maric that Loghain would betray him, and each time worse than the last." She turned to look at him again. "You, you he will not betray." She nodded. "You will do, I think."

"What would I get, if I simply took the book and left?"

She laughed. "You get to keep her. For a time."

He watched her a moment, then slowly shook his head. "No."

"Shame," she said, her voice dry. "What will it be, then?"

He gave her a respectful bow, then drew his blade. Flemeth nodded. "It is a dance poor Flemeth knows well. Let us see if she remembers the steps. You will earn what you take. I'd have it no other way."

#

The spoiled princess was a waste of time. Even Zevran could have taught the assassins a few things. Then she heard the innkeeper call a merchant by the name of Faryn. She walked towards him. He smiled at her. "Can I interest you in

something?" He waved towards his wagon. "I've got the finest selection of previously owned armor and weaponry this side of Val Royeaux."

"You're Faryn, right?"

His eyes shifted nervously. "You've... ah, heard of me?"

Sten loomed behind her. "Where is my sword?"

"I... ah... don't know what you mean, ser."

Saitada sighed. "How much do you want for it?"

"I... I don't have it! I swear by Andraste's knickers! I sold it on the way here!"

"Where is it now?"

"I sold it to a dwarf in Redcliffe. Name of Dwyn."

She smiled. "If you're lying, you do know we'll be back."

He looked from her to Sten, as if trying to figure out which of them he should grovel towards. "I'm not, I promise you!"

"We'll see," Sten said, folding his arms.

"Time to head back to Redcliffe, and see about finding the others."

#

"It has been some time since I left Lothering. When I stepped out of the cloister, I had no idea where my path would lead. I walked where the Maker led me and... He has rewarded me for my faith. I found you."

Brehan smiled at her, and really hoped this wasn't going to be a repeat of the last very confusing conversation. "Are you saying I'm a gift from the Maker?"

She giggled. "Something like that. The Maker wants His children to be happy. Would He have created in us the capacity for love if He did not intend for us to find it?"

"Then I thank the Maker for bringing us together."

"You don't know how it makes me feel to hear you say that. But now it's getting late. I think I might... turn in early. I can't help thinking about how soft and warm my bedroll is."

He frowned. "You don't want to talk to me anymore?"

"Oh, of course I do. You know how I enjoy your company. But it's getting a little chilly and I'd prefer to be in my bedroll."

He tried to conceal his disappointment. He'd been looking forward to sharing some more stories. "I'm going to stay up and write in my journal."

She gave him a confused look. "I didn't know you had a journal. Or wrote in it regularly."

"Well, I do."

"Well, maybe you could bring it to my tent and I could watch you write. I could give you suggestions." She mimicked holding a pen and writing. "Dear Journal... Leliana has shown much affection for me. Even asked me to come to bed with her, but alas, subtlety is lost on me."

"Wait, what?"

She put her hands on her hips. "Oh, now he gets it."

A slow smile spread across his face. "I don't think I could turn down such a proposition."

She caught him by the front of the cloak and pulled him to his feet. "Good. Now come with me, before I lose my patience."

#

Morrigan paced back and forth in front of the statue. Perhaps sending him by himself had not been a good plan. Maybe he could have persuaded one of the others. He'd been training with that fool Alistair to learn some of the tricks of the templars. And in the fade... she'd seen him face demons. Surely if anyone stood a chance, it would be him. If she'd gotten him killed...

She blinked. Could it really be that she was more afraid of him coming to harm than she was that he had failed? She shook her head. Sentiment was far too dangerous. But he...

And then there he was, walking through the trees. His armor

was scorched, and there was a wound on his side. He started to hand her something, and she shoved it away so she could weave a healing spell around him. It was only after the scratches on his face had vanished that she looked at his offering. "Mother's real grimoire, is it?" She felt a bit awkward. "I'm glad you were able to find it after all. My thanks for retrieving it. I shall begin studying it immediately and unlock the power that it holds."

He nodded. "We should be getting back to Redcliffe."

"The soldiers were killed by a demon. I killed it, and recovered some things that may satisfy Saitada."

"Good."

36. Chapter 36

Saitada coughed. Brehan and Leliana broke apart and turned to face her. They actually blushed. "Ara seranna-ma, lethallin," Brehan said.

"Wow," Saitada said, trying to keep a straight face. "She kisses you and you forget how to speak the King's Tongue." She wasn't sure what his next comment meant, but she was fairly sure it was rude. "We arrived just a few minutes ago. Find anything other than Leliana's bedroll?"

"You're terrible," Leliana said. "We found the caravan."

"They'd tried to avoid darkspawn, and ended up trapped in a little valley by them. We killed some darkspawn to create a distraction and got them on the move again."

"Good work. Any of the others back?"

"No. We only arrived last night," Leliana said. "How did your quest go?"

"More incompetent assassins. Hopefully the others will return soon. We are heading to Haven as soon as everyone arrives."

Finding Dwyn was easy. Convincing him to give up the sword slightly more difficult. He demanded six sovereigns at first. She started to negotiate, and then one of his thugs mentioned something about her being 'that elf's boss'. Dwyn immediately dropped the price to two sovereigns.

It was a fine sword, well-balanced and sharp. Spartan in it's design, with a subtle pattern on the hilt. She found Sten at the blacksmith's, overseeing the repair of his dented breastplate. His eyes widened when she offered him the sword.

"Strange." He held it, his eyes tracing the blade. "I had almost forgotten it. Completion." He looked at her, and a trace of amusement entered his voice. "Are you sure you are a Grey Warden? I think you must be an ashkaari to find a single lost blade in a country at war."

"You're welcome, Sten."

He shook his head. "I would thank you for this, if I knew how." He put the sword into it's sheath, then nodded to himself. "And I could deliver a much more satisfying answer to the arishok's question if the Blight were ended, don't you agree?"

She nodded. "Absolutely."

His face actually broke into a smile. "Then lead the way."

#

Brosca, Lenore, and Zevran arrived shortly before dinner.

Brosca saw her, and tossed her a salute. "One Bann rescued. Supply wagons underway."

"Let all flee before the wrath of the wardens," Lenore said, giggling.

"Are you..." Saitada narrowed her eyes. "Drunk?"

Brosca considered a moment. "Yes." He gestured back. "One of the supply wagons has..." He pulled a bottle from his pack and examined the label. "Whiskey."

"It is very good whiskey," Zevran said.

"They suggested we test it, to make sure it was good enough to present to..." Lenore blinked.

"Warden-Commander Aeducan, which is you," Brosca said. He handed her the bottle.

She looked at it. There was maybe a half inch left in the bottom. "It was very good whiskey," Lenore said.

She sighed. At least morale was high.

#

Perhaps it was being back in a real bed. Or perhaps it had just taken this long to process what had happened in the Wild. Or maybe, it was just the first chance he'd actually had to fall all the way into sleep.

He found himself standing once more in the hazy reality he recognized as the fade. It looked different, now. The area looked like the castle, save for floating candlesticks and books which turned pages by themselves. He walked, wandering aimlessly, until he found himself in the weapon yard.

"You can't be here." He heard the voice that sounded like his, and turned. The spirit stood next to a weapon stand.

"Don't you mean shouldn't?" he asked.

"No. I mean can't. You are no mage. Only mages can touch the fade through their dreams."

"I was an abomination for eleven years."

"I suppose you have a point there." It shook its head. Then it picked up a sword. "Shall we?"

Jerath drew his own blade, and stepped into the sparring ring.

#

The next morning, she saw Jerath and Morrigan sitting at a table, apparently having breakfast. She gestured to one of the servants, then joined them. "When did you two get in?"

"Shortly before midnight," Morrigan said. "We did not feel it necessary to wake you."

She nodded. "And the soldiers?"

"A demon. Took care of it."

"Let Teagan know. Will you two be good to head out again?"

They both nodded. She looked from one to the other, and then nodded in return. Jerath, at least, she trusted, and he seemed able enough to handle Morrigan. Alistair had mentioned he'd grasped the fine points of templar training quite readily. Alistair had been rather shocked, actually. Normally it took years. But then, normally, a fifteen year old elf wouldn't be the best fighter in their group. Maybe she just needed to redefine normal. "We'll leave as soon as everyone has eaten."

#

"What do we know about Haven?" Lenore asked.

"Next to nothing, I'm afraid. It's a rather isolated village. We'll stop in Honnleath, refresh our supplies, and see what they know." Saitada adjusted her weapon harness as they headed out.

It was the second morning when Brehan alerted them to darkspawn. An isolated group, but a fairly large one. Saitada considered, then called out the tactics. Enough for a challenge, to see how those who hadn't yet fought darkspawn managed.

They were starting to fight well together. Even Brehan managed to hold his ground, laying about him with the long-

handled axe as Leliana fired off arrows. Next to her, Sten went to work with military procession, matching his movements to hers so that they moved across the field like a well-oiled machine. Brosca and Zevran stayed with Wynne and Lenore, making short work of any that tried to threaten the mages. Alistair held the small hill Cathiel was using as a vantage point, her arrows flying with pinpoint precision.

As for Jerath and Morrigan... they were more akin to a force of nature. The witch laughed gleefully as a darkspawn exploded, then the ones hit by its entrails also began to explode. Jerath was a whirlwind of blades as he moved through a group of shrieks, taking out the more dangerous of the darkspawn and leaving the hurlocks and genlocks for the others.

When it was over, Saitada cleaned her blade and cast her senses to make sure none of the non-wardens had been affected. She'd been having Lenore make the potion Brehan had once used just to be safe, as well as making everyone drink a potion that was supposed to increase resistance. There had been no complaints.

The merchant they rescued gave them a golem control rod and a command word. He claimed there was a golem in Honnleath. Saitada handed the rod off to Lenore, who seemed to find the thing fascinating. She hoped the mage didn't take it apart, just in case there actually was a golem in Honnleath.

Honnleath had been overrun. Saitada divided them into teams. She took Sten, Wynne, and Zevran. She put Cathiel in charge of the second team, consisting of Alistair, Brosca, and Lenore. She considered a moment, then gave Jerath charge of the third team, Morrigan, Brehan, and Leliana. She expected to hear a complaint from Brehan, but he just looked at Jerath and shrugged.

She sent Cathiel down the center and Jerath to the west before taking the east. Zevran managed to make himself useful by disarming a few traps as they moved through. She called out the darkspawn as they went, and they managed to save a few villagers. Not many.

#

Cathiel sighed as Lenore began examining the golem. She was almost relieved that the control rod did nothing. The mage was visibly disappointed. She waved as she saw Saitada's group coming, more refugees in tow. "I think we've cleared most of them. Brehan said he sensed more spawn in a building over that way. Jerath's team went to clear it, see if they couldn't find more refugees."

Saitada nodded. "Lenore, Wynne, we've got people in need of healing." She gave Lenore a pointed look, and Lenore nodded.

Cathiel frowned, then cast her senses. At least two of the villagers had the taint. She clenched her fists. It wasn't fair. Maybe if they knew how the Joining worked, they could...

Alistair put a hand on her shoulder, his face sympathetic. She leaned into him, drawing strength from his presence.

She couldn't help but think of Fergus. Had he survived Ostagar, only to fall victim to the Blight? In some ways, the not knowing was worse. She watched as Saitada and Wynne took aside the two carrying the taint. She saw the hope die on their faces. The old man started to weep. The woman just looked beaten. Both looked to their families before refusing the potions.

Saitada gave them other bottles. The poison Brosca and Lenore had brewed back in Redcliffe. Lenore had assured them the poison was painless. Imbibers would simply go to sleep, and never awaken. It was the best they could offer.

Griffon was playing with a couple of the children, happily licking faces. He managed to get a bit of laughter out of some of the children when he rolled over and wiggled happily.

More people came out of the building Jerath and the others had entered. A few families were reunited to joyous cries.

#

"Still have the control rod?" Jerath asked.

"Um... yes." Lenore held it out.

"The merchant had the command word wrong." He shrugged.

"Oh. How did you find the real one?"

"I rescued a little girl from a demonic cat."

She laughed. "You know, if we weren't wardens, that would actually sound like a strange day." She walked back over to the golem, and activated the control rod before speaking the command phrase.

A moment later, she jumped backwards as it actually started to move. She heard Saitada let out a small curse, and gave the dwarf an apologetic look. "Sorry, sorry, I didn't think it would actually work."

And... it didn't. Oh, sure, the golem was awake and moving. It worked. The control rod, however... She glanced at Brosca. "You know, you really think I'd learn."

He chuckled, then managed to convince the golem to accompany them. Saitada looked a bit dismayed, but sighed and nodded.

Resupplying wasn't an option. In fact, they ended up having to give some of their supplies to the refugees to ensure they were able to reach Redcliffe safely. For that, at least, Lenore was grateful. She didn't introduce herself to the Rutherfords, but was glad to see they all seemed safe and sound. She made sure they all had some of the resistance potion she'd brewed before they went on their way.

It was the least she could do.

Haven

"Interesting strategy. Tell me: Do you intend to keep going north until it becomes south, and attack the archdemon from the rear?"

Saitada shrugged. "It'll never see this coming."

Sten's voice became dry. "Truly. It would surprise me if my enemy counter-attacked by running away and climbing a mountain."

She shook her head. "We're not 'running away' from anything."

"The archdemon is our goal. And we are heading away from it. To find the charred remnants of a dead woman." He shook his head. "You haven't thought this through."

She almost wished that were true. She'd been thinking it through for days. She also wished she was sure this was the right move. "Consider this training for what's to come."

"There is only so much one can prepare, kadan. Eventually, one must simply step forward and accept what comes." He looked down at her. "I trust you with my life. But this is not my life at risk. It is our goal."

"I know. I don't intend to fail, Sten."

"Be careful, kadan." He shook his head. "I have spoken my mind. Let us waste no more time here."

"Agreed. If this doesn't pan out..." she sighed. "Then it is on to Orzammar. We'll have to do this without the Ferelden army." She glanced up at Sten. "Any chance of getting the beresaad out to give us a hand?"

"I fear they would not reach us in time."

"And we'd still have to deal with Loghain closing the borders. Pity, if I had about twenty of you and Jerath, I think we'd have this whole 'darkspawn army' issue solved."

He actually smiled a bit at that.

#

The guard met them at the top of the incline. He folded his arms, and glared. "What are you doing in Haven? There is nothing for you here."

Saitada blinked, and looked back at the others. Leliana gave her a confused look and shrugged. This wasn't the reaction any of them were expecting. "I have business here."

He gave her a stern look. "No, you do not. I would have been informed if someone was expecting... a visitor."

She narrowed her eyes. What kind of town didn't want trade? She glanced back at the others again, then gave them a small nod. She saw Jerath and Sten go immediately on alert. "Is there a Brother Genitivi here?"

"Who?" He shrugged. "Perhaps Revered Father Eirik will

know of whom you speak." He gave her a dismissive look. "Unfortunately, he is ministering to the villagers at the moment, and cannot be disturbed."

"Revered father?" Leliana shook her head. "I have never heard of this."

The guard's voice became curt. It has always been thus in Haven. We do not question tradition."

Saitada began making plans to look around the village more discretely. "Very well. Excuse me."

"You may trade for supplies at the shop if you wish. Then I suggest you and your companions leave." He moved away from them.

"Ah, quiet, insular communities," Zevran said dryly. "There's always something nasty going on behind closed doors."

Wynne rolled her eyes. "You always think there's something nasty going on behind closed doors."

He winked at her. "That's because there often is." He smiled. "I hope it involves chains. I hope they ask me to join in."

Brosca and Lenore both snickered. Alistair made a groaning noise. Saitada just shook her head. "Cathiel, take Alistair and the filthy trio to this shop, see what supplies you can get. Brehan, Leliana, see what you can find out about this revered father business. Sten, Wynne, Shale, you're with me, let's

take a look around." She turned her gaze towards Jerath.
"I've got a feeling this town has something nasty. Go find it."
He nodded, and started walking, Morrigan a step behind him.

#

"I don't suppose you know of this place?"

"It's creepy."

Brehan nodded. "I'd almost feel better if I could sense darkspawn. At least then we'd know what dangers we faced."
He considered. "If the Chantry has brothers, why not fathers?"

"Men are considered to be too passionate to lead in matters of spirit."

"Male keepers seem to do just fine."

"And perhaps it is merely tradition, originating in the betrayal of Andraste by Maferath."

"Ah, tradition."

She laughed. "You say that as though the Dalish are not also steeped in tradition."

He tweaked her nose playfully. "Our traditions are prettier."

She gestured up at the chantry. "You cannot deny that is a beautiful building."

He ran his hand down the bark of a tree. "Look at how this tree stretches it's fingers to the sky. What building could compare?"

"I think this is one of those arguments neither of us will ever win."

"Only because you are too stubborn to admit I'm right." He kissed her cheek.

#

"Who are you? You're not from Haven..."

Brosca smirked. "Why does everyone tell me that like I don't already know it?"

"We... we don't get many visitors." The shopkeeper shuffled nervously.

Brosca jerked his head at the others, and they began to spread out and look through the store. The shopkeeper tried to keep eyes on all of them. Brosca walked up to the counter. "This is the shop? I'd like to trade."

"I don't have much, but I suppose you can take a look," the shopkeeper said. He gave Brosca a grudging look.

"Don't suppose you've seen man called Brother Genitivi?"

"No." He shook his head curtly. "I've never heard that name." He looked up at Lenore. "What are you doing? That's private!"

Brosca glanced at where Lenore was standing next to a door into another room. The shopkeeper started to walk towards her, and Brosca moved to block his way. He saw Cathiel's head come up, and Alistair put a hand on his sword. "What are you hiding?"

"I don't see how that's any of your concern."

He narrowed his eyes. "I'm making it my concern."

Fear began to show in the man's eyes as he snapped. "No! You have no right!"

Brosca blinked as the shopkeeper drew a long knife from his belt. Zevran's thrown blade caught him in the throat, and he dropped. Brosca shook his head. "What the sod?"

Lenore and Alistair walked into the other room. They came back out a moment later. Alistair shook his head. "One of Eamon's knights."

"They cut him up," Lenore said. "Like... well, blood magic comes to mind."

"Well, shit."

#

The altar had been used recently. Blood pooled in the center, and ran over the sides in dark rivulets. Morrigan frowned. "That is human blood."

He took a closer look, then raised an eyebrow at her. "How do you know?"

"I just do." She met his eyes. "I also know that no one can lose that much blood, and live."

Jerath put a hand on his blade. "Let's go."

#

Saitada saw Cathiel walking towards her, hand on her bow. The others followed. Brosca actually had his mace out. Suddenly Cathiel went for her bow and Saitada started to turn. Leliana's arrow pegged the crossbowman before he could bring his weapon to aim. Armed villagers began to come out of nowhere.

Against armed wardens though, they stood little chance. They moved the merely unconscious ones into a house, and blocked the door. "Explanations would be good," Saitada said.

"We found one of Redcliffe's knights," Lenore said. "Well, most of him."

"Most of him?"

"He'd been dismembered."

"Jerath and I found an altar, one likely used for blood magic," Morrigan said, gesturing back at the house.

Brehan glanced at Leliana. "We didn't find anything quite that

spectacular, but it looks like the rest of the village is up in the chantry."

Saitada nodded. "Let's go see if we can find some sodding sense anywhere in this place."

#

"...we are blessed beyond measure; we are chosen by the Holy and Beloved to be Her guardians."

"Humbly, we come before the Holy and Beloved."

"This sacred duty is given to us alone; rejoice, my brethren, and prepare your hearts to receive Her."

"Blessed fire cleanse and consecrate our souls."

"Lift up your voices, and despair not, for She will raise Her faithful servants to glory when Her -"

"Well, this is nice and creepy," Brosca muttered.

The man in the robes lifted his hands, and smiled at them.

"Ah... welcome. I heard we had a visitor wandering about the village. I trust you've enjoyed your time in Haven so far?"

"Your people aren't very welcoming," Saitada said. She jerked her head and the others spread out, taking up positions.

He gave her a scornful look. "What sort of welcome do you expect when you break into our homes and kill one of us?" He

gestured to his flock. "You see? This is why we do not like... 'visitors'. They are not like us. They will do us harm if we let them."

Saitada struck her boot against the ground, sending a ringing sound through the stone building. "What have you done to Brother Genitivi?"

"We don't owe you any explanations for our actions. We have a sacred duty; failure to protect Her would be a greater sin." He raised his hands towards the ceiling. "All will be forgiven." He lowered his hands, and a smile crept over his face. "Brothers, you know what must be done."

Almost as one, the worshipers in the Chantry drew their weapons and started to attack. Brehan hesitated as a young woman, barely into her teens, attacked, and took a dagger in the arm for it. Alistair had a similar difficulty. She understood their reluctance as a gray haired woman in farmer's clothing came at her with what looked to be a sickle. She smacked the woman down with her shield and went after the revered father.

He fell beneath her blade. She looked back to see Wynne doing some healing. Most of her comrades looked pale, and a bit sickened by what had happened. She sighed. At least with killing darkspawn, you were sure who and what the monsters were.

#

"Who are you? They... they've sent you to finish it?"

"Brother Genitivi?" Lenore asked, kneeling next to the man. Her fingers glowed white as she moved her hands above his injuries."

"You're..." Relief shone on his face. "You're not one of them. Thank the Maker."

"Are you all right?"

He gave her a disbelieving look. "What do you think? Weeks of scant food and water, the torture... oh, I've never felt better in my life."

"I get the point," she said, shaking her head ruefully. "Can I do anything for you?"

He shifted, and winced. "The leg's not doing so well and... I can't feel my foot."

"Wynne, can you help?"

She nodded, and came over to begin checking the injured man. "I can set the leg and ease some of the pain, but he'll need a lot of rest in order to heal."

He shook his head. "I don't have time to rest now. I'm so close. The Urn is just up that mountain."

Lenore blinked at him. "How do you know?"

"My research led me to Haven... and I have heard the villagers talking. I know the Urn is here." He tried to sit up. "Haven lies in the shadow of the mountain that holds the Urn. There is an old temple there, built to protect it." He grabbed Lenore's arm and gave her a triumphant smile. "The door is always locked, but I know what the key is. Eirik wears a medallion that opens the temple door... I've seen what he does with it."

She raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about?"

"The medallion is like... a puzzle box... I will show you, if you bring it to me."

She glanced back at the others. Saitada tossed her the medallion. "This medallion?"

This time he managed to sit up. "Yes, that is your key. Take me to the mountainside, and I will show you."

"Are you sure you can make the journey?" she asked, looking over his leg.

He gave her a hopeful look. "It is not that far and... will you let me lean on you? For the Urn, any pain is worth enduring."

She considered, then nodded and looked over at Brosca and Zevran. "Maybe you two could rig a litter? Or Shale could..."

"Shale could not," the golem said.

"Rig a litter. We'll get him up there," Saitada said. "He's made

it this far."

#

They made it up the mountain without incident. Alistair and Brehan got Brother Genitivi on his feet, and practically carried him to the door. He touched it almost reverently. "Here we are. Give me the medallion, and let's see if I can remember." He fiddled with it. "Yes... you see, it can be manipulated, just like this..." It sprang open, forming a star shape. "And there... a key to open the way."

"I wonder who created that," Lenore mused.

Genitivi smiled at her. "It may have been passed down through the generations from the first people who built the temple." He looked back at the door. "Now... where does this go?" He fit the key into an indentation, and the door swung open.

They entered, and looked around in wonder. Leliana's face was almost as ecstatic as Genitivi's as she took in the carvings and frescoes. Genitivi's eyes were wet. "What I would give to have seen this hall in all its splendor, as it was meant to be..." He laughed. "Still, sweep away the ice and the snow, and traces of beauty remain."

Saitada shook her head. "We can't afford to linger."

"I'm sorry... what? I was a little distracted. I apologize." He pointed. "These carvings were created just after Andraste's

death, and they may reveal things about Her life that we do not yet know... I think I need more time to study these statues and carvings."

"You want to stay here? Is it safe?" Lenore asked.

"I could not keep up with you with my injuries. I should be safe; I don't think there are any villagers here. Go. I will be all right. Perhaps my destiny was only to lead you to the Urn."

Saitada gave him a brief nod, and considered. "Shale, stay with him. Any villagers give him trouble, well, just pretend they are pigeons."

"I can handle that," Shale said.

37. Chapter 37

Saitada sent Cathiel, Alistair, Lenore, and Zevran down the right corridor, and Jerath, Morrigan, Brehan, and Leliana down the left. These cultists, at least, were all armed soldiers. After the events of the town, she almost took a bit of pleasure from fighting these ones. What kind of madmen used children and farmers as the first line of defense?

They regrouped behind a door. It took Lenore a couple minutes to puzzle out how to open it.

"What the hell are those?" Brosca called out.

"Ash wraiths," Lenore replied. "It's a demon that made it's physical body out of ashes instead of..."

"Lenore, focus!" Saitada said.

"Oh, right." She sent a wave of ice at the oncoming creature. Jerath's sword shattered the thing.

"It's really quite fascinating," Lenore said. "Instead of inhabiting a corpse, it forms a quasi-material body out of what it finds. I once heard about one made entirely out of mold in..."

"Lenore..." Saitada sighed. "Can we expect more?"

"Um, yes. Probably."

"Can you tell us anything helpful?"

"They don't burn. At least, not the ones made of ashes, I don't know about the ones made out of mold. And they flow apart and re-materialize, get behind you."

"Watch your flanks, people."

#

Wynne and Lenore healed them before they moved on to the second level. Alistair was complaining about the scent of burned hair, and Cathiel was assuring him that nobody would even notice. Saitada looked from Lenore to Leliana. "Any ideas what else we can expect?"

"This is nothing like a true Chantry," Leliana said. "I do not know."

"There is magic here. A strangeness to the veil." Lenore shook her head. "It is likely what drew the wraiths."

Saitada started to nod, then caught a strange expression on the face of the swamp witch. "Morrigan, something you would like to add?"

"These cultists... I believe they are using a form of blood magic. It enhances warriors, makes them stronger, and nearly immune to pain. They will not be subdued."

"Yeah. Noticed that," Brehan said, wincing.

Saitada sighed, then nodded. "Might need to send an army back up here one day. Alright, let's keep moving."

#

"Ar tu na'lin emma mi," Brehan called out as he flung the dragonling off himself. "Ma halam!"

"I think they like you," Brosca said.

"Maybe Dalish are tasty," Lenore added.

"I hate you both," he said, accepting the hand up from Leliana. "Where did those things come from?"

"Well, when a mommy dragon and a daddy dragon love each other very much..." Jerath said.

Brehan stared at him in disbelief. Jerath gave him a shrug and an innocent look. Brehan shook his head. "Da'mi, emma shem'nan."

"I think he just threatened me," Jerath said. He looked at Morrigan. "Did he just threaten me?"

"I am not certain. Must one be a threat in order to threaten?"

"Stop having fun," Saitada said, her lips twitching. "And Brehan, stop playing with the... what are you doing now?"

"Skinning the drake."

"I... can you do that later? After we've dealt with the cultists trying to kill us?"

He nodded, and picked his sword back up.

#

"Stop! You will go no further." The man who led the group of cultists was large, and clearly thought of himself as intimidating.

After her company of the past few months, Cathiel was less than impressed. "Oh? Is that so?"

He sneered at her, and spoke in a voice he obviously intended to be commanding. "You have defiled our temple. You have spilled the blood of the faithful, and slaughtered our young." He gestured at the body of one of the dragonlings. "No more. You will tell me now, intruder, why you have done all this. Why have you come here?"

Cathiel glanced back over her shoulder. Saitada gave an eyeroll and a nod. Cathiel narrowed her eyes. "We've come to make sure you never hurt anyone again." She nocked an arrow to her bow.

He threw back his head as he shouted. "To arms, my brethren! Andraste will grant us victory!"

Again with the Andraste. These people were barking.

#

"What the hell..."

"Dragon eggs," Morrigan said as she examined the chamber.

"Heh. Omelets," Brosca said, elbowing Lenore.

"Morrigan?" Saitada asked.

"'Tis a hatchery."

Lenore looked around, and swallowed. "You realize that this means somewhere around here, there is a fully grown dragon, right?"

Saitada blinked, then sighed. "Let's... try to avoid coming to it's attention, shall we?"

#

Saitada growled. "Lenore, when I say things like 'let's not come to the attention of the dragon' and 'maybe summoning the demon isn't a good idea', does your brain even register the statements?"

"I... uh... am going to have to say no," Lenore said, her face pale as the dragon circled overhead.

"You just saw a gong on a mountainside and just had to ring it?"

"I was curious."

"Stone, here it comes. Get down."

The flaming breath of the dragon was mostly blocked by her shield. She had to get it off her arm as the metal heated and seared. "Run for... Jerath, what the hell..."

He ran atop some of the broken columns. As the dragon came around for another pass, he leaped from the tallest and came down on the dragon's back, driving his sword into it's neck and hanging on. Instead of searing them with another blast of flame, the dragon roared and landed, throwing it's head back as it snapped at the elf.

"Attack," Saitada said, adjusting her plan. She drew her sword and charged in. The dragon hissed and clawed at them. It's tail swept across the field, sending Sten and Brehan tumbling into a snowdrift. Alistair darted in, and the dragon knocked him over and pinned him with one foot. Cathiel fired an arrow into it's mouth as it bent to deliver a killing bite, and it leaped backwards. Brosca yanked Alistair out of the way.

Jerath climbed it's neck and held on as it swung it's head from side to side. It raked across the field again with it's claws, narrowly missing Saitada. And then Jerath drove his sword into it's head, just behind the eye. As the dragon began to thrash, he let go and tumbled lightly to the ground, then continued until he was out of range of it's stomping feet. It took a few moments, but then it went still, collapsing into a heap.

Wynne knelt next to Alistair as Lenore went to check on Sten and Brehan. The rest of them just stared. "You killed a dragon," Brosca said.

"It was trying to kill us," Jerath replied.

"Salroka, you jumped on the back of a dragon, climbed it's neck, and stabbed it in the brain."

"It seemed a good idea at the time."

Saitada just started to laugh. "Jerath?"

"Yes?"

"Would you please stop jumping on things big enough to swallow you whole?"

He considered a moment. "Probably not."

#

They came to another set of giant doors. Unlike the others, these appeared to have not been opened in some time.

"Saitada?" Lenore called from where she was talking to Leliana.

"Yes?"

"Inside, we will likely be tested. I don't know what we will face, but it won't be easy."

"If it were easy," Jerath said, "someone else would do it."

"Exactly. So... it's probably more dangerous than the dragon cultists."

Saitada nodded, then looked over the others. "Sten, Zevran, Wynne and I will go first. Cathiel, you take Alistair, Broasca, and Lenore. Jerath, you head up the third team. Morrigan, Brehan, and Leliana." She strapped her shield back to her arm. "If these ashes exist, we only need a little. Cathiel, give us ten minutes, then follow us in."

Sten pushed open the doors with a small grunt of effort. Wynne's face was almost reverent as she used her magic to make the crystal on her staff glow with a soft white light. Zevran looked a bit reluctant to enter, but followed them in.

A man, his armor styled differently than any she'd seen thus far, stood before another door. His head came up as they approached. "I bid you welcome, pilgrim." His solemn voice had a curious undertone to it.

"Who are you?" Saitada asked.

"I am the Guardian, the protector of the Urn of Sacred Ashes. I have waited years for this."

"For someone to take the Ashes?"

"No one can take the Ashes. They belong here. It has been my duty, my life, to protect the Urn and prepare the way for

the faithful who come to revere Andraste. For years beyond counting have I been here, and shall I remain until my task is done and the Imperium has crumbled into the sea."

"Will your task ever be done?" It must be some kind of spirit, or perhaps a golem of strange nature. She wondered if they were going to have to fight him. A part of her did not want to.

"I do not know, and I do not question."

She sighed. "Let's not waste time. How do I get to the Urn?"

"You have come to honor Andraste, and you shall, if you prove yourself worthy."

"I need the Ashes to cure a noble man."

"Still, you must prove yourself worthy. It is not my place to decide your worthiness. The Gauntlet does that. If you are found worthy, you will see the Urn and be allowed to take a small pinch of the Ashes for yourself. If not..."

"All right, let's get this over with then."

"Before you go, there is something I must ask. I see that the path that led you here was not easy. There is suffering in your past - your suffering, and the suffering of others. Bhelen's machinations led to Trian's death and your exile." Saitada felt a chill go down her spine as the guardian spoke. "You allowed this to happen. Do you think you failed Trian?"

She had, for a long time. That time had passed. "No. I could

not have known that was what Bhelen had planned."

She thought she saw a gleam of understanding in the guardian's eyes as it replied. "Then you do not dwell on past mistakes- - neither yours, nor someone else's."

"Parshaara. Leave the past where it falls." Sten nodded to her.

The guardian turned his gaze on the qunari. "And what of those that follow you?"

"Demand whatever answers you want, spirit."

"You came to this land as an observer, but you killed a family in a blind rage. Have you failed your people, by allowing a qunari to be seen in that light?"

"I have never denied that I failed." Sten's voice was blunt and flat.

The guardian turned to look at Wynne. "Ask your question, Guardian." She gave him a respectful nod. "I am ready."

"You are ever the advisor, ready with a word of wisdom. Do you wonder if you spout only platitudes, burned into your mind in the distant past?" His voice held a small note of accusation. "Perhaps you are only a tool used to spread the word of the Circle and the Chantry. Does doubt ever chip away at your truths?"

Wynne's face remained calm. "You frame your statement in

the form of a question, yet you already know our answers. There is no sense in hiding, is there? Yes. I do doubt at times. Only the fool is completely certain of himself."

"And the Antivan elf..."

"Is it my turn now?" Zevran shook his head, his expression showing a trace of annoyance. "Hurrah. I'm so excited."

"Many have died at your hand. But is there any you regret more than a woman by the name of-"

"How do you know about that?" Zevran's expression was startled, his eyes wide. Saitada made a mental note to mention this to Brosca.

"I know much; it is allowed to me. The question stands, however. Do you regret-"

"Yes. The answer is yes, if that's what you wish to know. I do." He shook his head flippantly. "Now move on."

"The way is open. Good luck, and may you find what you seek."

#

"You abandoned your father and mother, leaving them in the hands of Rendon Howe, knowing he would show no mercy. Do you think you failed your parents?"

Cathiel's voice shook. "Yes." She swallowed. "I should have

defended them to the death."

"Thank you. That is all I wished to know."

Alistair put a hand on her shoulder. "You are too hard on yourself. No one's perfect."

The Guardian turned his gaze. "Alistair, knight and Warden... you wonder if things would have been different if you were with Duncan on the battlefield. You could have shielded him from the killing blow. You wonder, don't you, if you should have died, and not him?"

"I..." He sighed. "Yes. If Duncan had been saved, and not me, everything would be better. If I'd just had the chance, maybe..." Cathiel reached for his hand, and he closed his fingers around hers.

"You rose above your caste to become a Grey Warden, but you left behind your family who relied on you. Tell me, pilgrim, did you fail them?"

Brosca shook his head. "No. Even if I'd stayed, they would still be miserable."

"Jowan was discovered by the templars. You were helping him. Tell me, do you think you failed Jowan?"

"Yes." Lenore's voice was blunt. "There must have been something more I could have done."

"The way is open. Good luck, and may you find what you

seek."

#

Brehan caught a glimpse of Cathiel's group going through the door. He took a step towards the man standing there, then looked at Jerath. Jerath gave him a nod as he bent to briefly examine one of the bodies that lay on the floor.

The guardian spoke when Brehan approached, telling him of the gauntlet. Leliana's face held a combination of nervousness and exhilaration. Brehan felt apprehensive. There was power here, he could feel it. But if this was a place of the Maker, then... The guardian's voice drew his attention back.

"Tamlen was one of your tribe - a blood brother. You left him in the ruins, left him to his fate. Tell me, pilgrim, did you fail Tamlen?"

Of course he'd failed Tamlen. "Yes. I could have pulled him away from that mirror."

"You could not have known what would happen," Leliana said to him. You did what you thought was best."

The Guardian looked at her. "And you... why do you say the Maker speaks to you, when all know that the Maker has left? He spoke only to Andraste. Do you believe yourself Her equal?"

"I never said that! I-" Her face was indignant.

"In Orlais, you were someone. In Lothering, you feared you would lose yourself, become a drab sister, and disappear. When your brothers and sisters of the cloister criticized you for what you professed, you were hurt, but you also reveled in it. It made you special. You enjoyed the attention, even if it was negative." Brehan narrowed his eyes at the guardian, and briefly considered punching it in the face as it kept speaking.

"You're saying I made it up, for... for the attention? I did not! I know what I believe!" She glared.

It turned to look at Jerath, and Brehan wondered if the young fighter would end up just killing the thing. "By the time you reached Shianni, she was broken, brutalized. You were too late. Tell me, pilgrim, did you fail Shianni?"

Jerath's face was calm, expressionless. "My answer is my own, Guardian." His voice was quiet, and yet, respectful.

"Very well. You know your own heart."

"I'm glad you declined," Morrigan said. "This question has nothing to do with our goal."

"And you, Morrigan, Flemeth's daughter... what -"

"Begone, spirit. I will not play your games."

"I will respect your wishes."

Brehan sighed. If he'd have known it would do that... He took Leliana's hand as they went through the door.

#

"Greetings, my exiled sister." Saitada felt tears well in her eyes, and blinked them away. Trian stood before her. His lips curled in that stupidly comforting sneer of his as he continued to speak. "I would lament your fate, but why should I? You have been cast out to walk the surface, whereas I... hmph..." His face relaxed into a smile. "But I am too hard on you. Bhelen made fools of us both. Were I a spectator, I would applaud him for his clever manipulations." He gave a regretful sigh. "However, I find it hard for me remain... unbiased in this regard."

"Bhelen betrayed us both."

"But the betrayals of Orzammar do not weigh down your steps. You have not faltered, and I am proud of you." He held out his hand, and something gleamed within it. "Take this, and use it well. I give you this... and my blessing." He smiled as she took the amulet from him. "Remember me."

She felt Sten's hand on her shoulder, and she took a breath as the image of her brother faded away. She slipped the amulet around her neck, and continued on.

It was perhaps for the best that the next room contained something to hit.

#

Cathiel gasped as she saw her father standing there. "My

dearest child..."

"Father?"

Sadness filled his voice. "You know that I am gone, and all your prayers and wishes will not bring me back. No more must you grieve, my girl. Take the pain and the guilt, acknowledge it, and let go. It is time. You have such a long road ahead of you, and you must be prepared. And so I leave this in your hands..." He held out an amulet to her. "I know you will do great things with it."

She held the amulet as her father's form faded away. Alistair put his arm around her shoulders, and a moment later, she felt Brosca and Lenore hugging her as well. The four of them stood there, mutually embracing for several moments before moving on to the next room.

#

Leliana almost seemed to enjoy the riddles. She chatted about the various figures as they moved to the next room. After the guardian, Brehan hung back a pace, letting Jerath take the lead. He told himself it was because Saitada had put the other man in charge, but he knew he was lying.

They came through the door and an elf woman stood there. She looked at Jerath. "Hey."

Jerath sighed. "Here to ask me a riddle?"

She folded her arms and gave him a sardonic look. Her voice actually sounded hurt. "That's how you greet an old friend, huh?" Envy filled her face. "Life out there's been good to you, hasn't it? You're respected, even among humans. Do you remember us, where you came from, and what some of us still face every day?" Her voice grew accusing."

He shook his head. "Using guilt on me?"

"No, of course not." She tilted her head, and her voice grew hurt again. "When the Guardian asked, you wouldn't answer. Why? Some things are learned only when you find them for yourself. Still, you have come far." She held something out. After a moment, he took it from her. "Seeing you now..." Her face became warm. "Gives me hope... for all of us."

Jerath tucked whatever she'd given him into his belt pouch and walked away while her form was still fading. Brehan exchanged a look with Leliana. She shook her head. For a moment, Brehan found himself wishing he had stepped into the room first. It would have been nice, perhaps, to talk to Tamlen once more.

He and Leliana stepped into the next room to find Jerath stepping over corpses that... looked remarkably like the four of them. Morrigan watched Jerath walk towards the next door, a curious expression on her face. Then she followed. Brehan and Leliana exchanged another look, then followed as well. Brehan glanced at the corpse that looked like Jerath as it began to fade, then back at the living version. Sometimes, it was easy to forget Jerath was just a kid.

#

Saitada felt like punching Zevran as they all stripped to cross the fire. The elf wasn't even bothering to hide his leer. She was about to say something, when Wynne 'accidentally' dropped her staff onto his head. Zevran winced and grumbled.

The Guardian reminded her that they were permitted only a pinch as they redressed. She carefully put the ashes into a small paper envelope, and tucked that into a small silk pouch Wynne provided. She saw the expression on the woman's face, and suggested Wynne be the one to carry them. Wynne's smile nearly split her face in two.

They exited the temple to wait for the others.

#

Cathiel was not going to look down. Looking down would be foolish. She could trust her companions. Lenore was smart, she'd figure out the puzzle. Looking down would serve no purpose at all. She heard Lenore direct Alistair to stand on a different spot, and then the stone in front of her became solid. She stepped out onto it, and looked down. "Maker's breath."

"Don't look down," Alistair called to her.

"Focus!" Cathiel yelled back.

"Okay, Brosca, move to that one. It should get her all the way across."

"Should?" Cathiel shot the mage a glare. "What do you mean should? Could you be a little more certain?"

"No," Lenore called back. "Though since I don't see splattered qunari anywhere, I have to assume the others made it across." She stopped, then frowned. "Unless it really is a bottomless pit."

"You are not helping!"

Brosca stepped onto the tile, and sure enough, the next stone became solid. Cathiel ran across. As soon as her feet touched the other side, she breathed a sigh of relief and looked back. All the stones were solid now, and the others quickly joined her. Alistair threw his arms around her. Brosca and Lenore made cheering sounds, and Cathiel held out her hand in a rude gesture. Alistair blushed and let her go.

#

Jerath walked around the side, stepping on each of the tiles as he went. Brehan watched as the stones faded in and out. "So... who wants to walk across the bottomless chasm while the rest of us try to make a path?" Brehan asked.

Morrigan started to repeat Jerath's actions on the other side of the pit, and then suddenly cried out a protest. Brehan swung his head around to see Jerath leaping from the side to the platform. He landed in a crouch, then looked at the path. It was glowing now, solid.

Brehan tested the path gingerly, and then walked across, followed by the two ladies. Leliana glanced at him. "I'll hold him, you hit him," she said.

Jerath just raised an eyebrow that dared them to try. "I hate puzzles," he said as he opened the door.

Morrigan shook her head and laughed fondly. Brehan shook his head.

They walked into the next room to see a wall of fire. "Going to jump that too?" Brehan asked.

"Little high. Might need you to give me a leg up."

Leliana was examining an altar. "Cast off the trappings of worldly life and cloak yourself in the goodness of spirit. King and slave, lord and beggar, be born anew in the Maker's sight."

"So..."

"I believe we need to undress."

"Can't we just throw Jerath over the fire?"

Morrigan sighed, and began unfastening her skirt. Jerath began undoing the buckles on his armor. Brehan sighed and looked across at Leliana. She shrugged, and they began taking off their own gear.

"Anyone makes a remark about it being cold in here, I am

going to shoot them," Leliana said.

Brehan chuckled. He gave Leliana a wink, and she blushed. He turned to glance at the others, and blinked. Long, thin silver scars were visible on Jerath's back. He narrowed his eyes when he caught Brehan looking, and Brehan tore his gaze away. They stepped through the fire.

38. Chapter 38

The path back was easier. Wynne and Leliana appeared almost lost in reverence as they discussed the temple. Brehan had insisted on skinning both the dragon and the drakes they'd encountered, and their packs were heavy with their findings.

They found Genitivi still looking around the entry chamber. He'd managed somehow to cajole Shale into brushing aside snow and ice. He heard them approach, and his eyes widened. "Welcome back! You were gone for quite some time. Well? Did you find it?"

Saitada smiled. "The Urn? Yes."

"What... what was it like? Coming to the Urn, I mean?"

She smiled, and gestured for him to talk to Leliana and Wynne. The two immediately began to fill him in on every detail. Her eyes went to the rest of her companions. Except for Leliana and Wynne, the rest all looked a bit disturbed by the events on the mountaintop. She couldn't blame them. She'd almost managed to put all the grief aside. Seeing Trian again brought it back. Her fingers wrapped around the amulet. They needed to get back on the road soon. It was easier to push it away when they traveled.

#

She took first watch, letting the others find their tents. She sighed, then blinked as Jerath sat down near her. "Are you alright?"

"Just... tired, I guess. It's been a long day."

"The stories always seem to leave out the mud and uphill marching in the rain."

"I suppose that is one nice thing about the deep roads. No rain."

They sat there in silence for a few minutes. "Want to talk about it?"

She gave him a wan smile. "You don't have to."

He held up a hand. "I promise not to let any of the others know our fearless leader has feelings just like they do."

She shook her head, then leaned back and looked at him. "Trian could be a pain in the ass. There were days in which I couldn't stand him. But he was still my big brother."

"Trian did not die by your hand."

"No, he died by my silence. I knew something was going on... I could have warned him, done something... And instead I just let it happen. Maybe I deserve this exile."

"Had you spoken of your suspicions, what would he have done?"

She considered the question. "He'd have told me I was foolish, that Bhelen didn't have it in him, that I was imagining things... but maybe he'd have been on guard. I don't know. I suppose it's foolish to play the 'only if' game." She glanced back at him, and realized blood was dripping from the hand in which he held his copy of the amulet. "Jerath... your hand..."

He glanced down, his expression startled. Carefully he opened his hand, revealing the crushed amulet inside. Shards of glass and metal penetrated his skin. "Ow", he said ruefully.

Saitada began picking the pieces out. "Perhaps I should ask if you want to talk about it?"

He twitched a shoulder. "I don't like... things... digging into my head."

"Brehan mentioned you didn't answer the guardian."

"There was no answer to his question. I did not get there in time to prevent any harm to her... but I went. I brought them home. All it cost me was everything. And if I had the chance to do it over, I would change nothing. I don't need forgiveness or absolution from some cheap imitation of my cousin."

She looked at him, then hugged him. He started to pull away, then let her hold him for a moment. "I don't think it was ever about getting forgiveness or absolution from them... but from

ourselves. I need to forgive myself for Trian. Cathiel needed to remember her father was proud of her. And perhaps you needed to remember why you are in this fight in the first place." She smoothed the poultice over Jerath's hand, and on impulse, reached up to ruffle his hair. "You are a good man, little brother. And I don't like how these spirits and demons seem so comfortable digging into my head, either." She thought back to the circle. "It was bad enough in the fade."

"I'm sorry about Duncan."

Saitada gave a wan smile. "I know it wasn't him, but it just brought back Ostagar, and learning he was gone and there was nothing left. It's like Alistair said, nothing to remember him by."

"That's not entirely true."

"What do you mean?"

"In Denerim, I needed a sword. He gave me one of his." He offered her the sword. "Perhaps this would be better in your hands."

She took it from him, and caressed the hilt. It was a twin of the one Duncan had carried to his death. She wondered how she'd not noticed that before. "Thank you."

"You are wrong, you know."

She blinked. "I am?"

"If Duncan had not passed by and seen something in us, all of us would be dead now. You say there is nothing to remember him by, yet you've already done the impossible because of him. He isn't gone, Saitada. You are making him immortal. Him, and Trian."

"I..." A tear ran down her cheek. "Thank you."

The elf nodded. "Sleep. I'll take the watch."

She nodded, and went to her tent. She made it to the bedroll before the rest of the tears came.

#

Jerath looked across the fire at the woman who'd joined him shortly after he'd sent Saitada to her tent. "You've started to ask me a question three times now."

"Well..." Morrigan poked at the fire.

"Just ask."

"Who is Shianni? What did the guardian mean, broken and brutalized?"

"Did I tell you how I became a Grey Warden?"

"Only that you were conscripted."

"Duncan conscripted me to save me from execution. I killed the Arl of Denerim's son for raping my cousin. Vaughan and

his friends came to the alienage to make sport of our women. He kidnapped a few of them. Duncan loaned me a sword, and my friend Soris and I went to take them back. We got there...a bit too late for my cousin, Shianni."

"Duncan did not come with you?"

"Better that he didn't." Though given the way Ostagar had ended, he doubted it would have made much difference by this point. Except that if Duncan had known what he was back then...

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

He met her eyes. "I killed them, Morrigan. When I left the Arl's estate, the only ones that still breathed were the few servants that did not try to raise an alarm at my approach. I killed the guards. I killed the other lordlings. I killed Vaughan."

"I see."

"There was a witness to Vaughan's actions in the alienage, a human priestess. When the events of the estate were uncovered, the guard knew where to come. They wanted revenge for the justice I took, and brought torches with them, to burn the alienage in retaliation. So I stepped forward and confessed to my actions. Duncan then conscripted me right out of the hands of the guard captain."

"As you expected."

He shook his head. "No. At the time, I didn't know about the rite of conscription."

"You intended to die for your people?" She curled her lip slightly.

"I could die, or I could live knowing I had done nothing, again, like all the others, so many times. Death or a fate far worse. Easy choice."

Her nod was understanding. "Dead lion, or live jackal. And yet here you are, a live lion."

"Being a Grey Warden is a slower death, I suppose, but it is still, ultimately, a death. Just an opportunity for one more meaningful."

"You do not expect to live through this?"

"I never found what I expected from life to matter in the slightest. Why worry about the future, when the now holds so much possibility?" His voice was wry.

She gave a small laugh, then her voice became serious again. "I take it you would prefer the others not know of this?"

"They will expect me to be remorseful." He twitched a shoulder. "It gets annoying."

"It does, doesn't it?"

"So tell me, how did you become a Grey Warden?" Wynne asked her. "I mean, I heard at the trial, but..."

"I was cast out to die in the Deep Roads, and found Duncan there."

"You survived the Deep Roads and the darkspawn that dwell there?" Wynne gave her a respectful look. "Truly, you were born to be a Grey Warden."

She touched the hilt of Duncan's sword. It was odd, how much more at peace she felt with it at her side. "I prefer this life. I can sleep more soundly, it seems. Being exiled has given me a freedom I never had before. Orzammar has forgotten me, but I will protect her."

"Sometimes it gives me comfort to think that everything will end up the way it's supposed to, that it will be alright. You were chosen; you survived the Joining when others did not. Perhaps it was meant to be."

#

"Tell me... are you really Flemeth's daughter?" Lenore asked, falling into step next to Morrigan.

"I assume you are actually asking whether Flemeth herself gave birth to me. Truly, I do not know. I once asked Flemeth that very question, and she merely laughed at me. 'Tis not inconceivable that she could capture a Chasind man, or perhaps change to a more attractive form to attract him

willingly. I find it more difficult to imagine her with child."

Lenore considered a moment. "Could she have stolen you as a child?"

"It seems likely, does it not? In animal form a babe could easily be spirited away and raised as Flemeth's own. I do know the tales of Flemeth having many daughters, even though I have never met another. And Flemeth has always treated me as her blood."

"What if you have real family out there?" Lenore asked. If Morrigan did, perhaps they could find them. It might give Morrigan a better foundation. The swamp witch was intelligent and skilled, and Lenore wanted to like her, but she lacked social skills altogether. She rarely exchanged anything other than barbs with anyone but Jerath.

"I would have nothing in common with them, nor any need for what they might provide. Flemeth taught me everything I needed to learn. How to survive. The meaning of power. The truth of men. If other mothers do not teach these things, then I believe them the lesser."

"I suppose that's true." Lenore could see how Flemeth would believe it, anyway.

"You suppose it's true?" Morrigan looked at her in askance. "'Tis true. To indulge in love is to indulge in delusions. Surely a Grey Warden such as yourself does not believe otherwise?"

Lenore shrugged. "I'm not sure what I believe."

"An honest answer, if a somewhat vapid one. You shall learn in time, if fortune smiles on you."

#

Saitada rolled her eyes as Brosca, Lenore, and Zevran apparently took turns flirting with everyone in the camp. Cathiel looked ready to shoot Brosca by the time Alistair even figured out that Brosca was flirting. The young knight spent the next mile of road a shade just shy of crimson. Zevran managed to get Morrigan to soften a little before she figured out the joke and threatened to do him grievous harm.

The best part might have been when Morrigan decided to get in on the fun and flirt with Sten.

"You seem so deep in thought, my dear Sten. Thinking of me, perhaps? The two of us, together at last?"

"Yes."

"I... what did you say?"

"You will need armor, I think. And a helmet. And something to bite down on. How strong are human teeth?"

"How strong are my teeth?"

"Qunari teeth can bite through leather, wood, even metal given time. Which reminds me, I may try to nuzzle."

"Nuzzle?"

"If that happens, you'll need an iron pry bar. Heat it in a fire, first, or it may not get my attention."

"Perhaps it would be better if we did not proceed."

"Are you certain? If it will satisfy your curiosity..."

"Yes. Yes, I think it is best."

Saitada sighed. At least morale was high. Oddly, Sten seemed to be one of the few that got along well with Shale. The golem seemed to take great delight in antagonizing the others. Jerath managed to avoid some of the scorn by presenting the golem with a gift of magically charged gemstones, which the golem used to decorate itself. And by avoiding it.

She caught a snippet of conversation from Brosca, and her eyes widened. "Stone, are you three keeping score?"

"Well, yes. That is how the game is played, no?" Zevran asked.

"Cept now that you know, can't use you as a tie breaker," Brosca said.

She buried her face in her palm.

"We could use Jerath." Lenore glanced over at where he was sitting.

"The last time he was involved the three of us ended up sleeping with a pirate," Brosca said.

"True. Good times," Zevran said. "Except there do not appear to be any pirates nearby."

"I... am going to walk away now, and pretend I never heard this conversation." Saitada sighed. At least morale was high.

#

Brehan blinked at Wynne walked over to where he was adding ingredients to the stew pot. "So tell me, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

He shrugged. "I was tainted and only the Joining could save me."

"Then you became a Grey Warden out of necessity. But Duncan must have also seen something special in you. The order does not take in recruits just to save their life. You must be proud to be able to represent your tribe and the Dalish as a Grey Warden."

He shook his head. "The keeper forced me to go. I would rather have died." He sighed. "You see, I used to be something of an ass." He heard several sounds of agreement from the others around the campfire, and Brosca mutter something about past tense being inappropriate.

Wynne laughed softly. "Take heart, dear friend. You survived,

even when you were not expected to. We do not know yet what lies in store for you, or the name you carry."

He handed her a bowl of the stew. "I just hope when Hahren Paivel tells the story around the campfire, it will be a good one. And not 'and then he tripped over his sword and was skewered by a Hurlock, the end.'"

#

Morrigan quickened her pace to catch up to where Jerath was taking point while Brehan ranged to hunt. "Tis a curious thing. I do not know how else to describe it."

Jerath glanced at her. "What? Is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing is wrong. It... is a little embarrassing to admit, in fact. I am reminded of our first meeting in the Wilds. I had been in animal form for some time, watching your progress. I knew immediately that you were far more formidable than the ones with whom you traveled. I found you intriguing. Yet I resented it when Flemeth assigned me to travel with you. I assumed that, at best, you would drive me from your company as soon as we left the Wilds."

"Why would I do that?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

She sighed, and fidgeted a little. "I am aware that I have... little talent for forming friendships. To put it lightly. 'Tis something I know nothing of, nor ever thought I needed. Yet when I discovered Flemeth's plans, you did not abandon me.

Whatever your reasons you fought what must have been a terrible battle without hope of real reward."

"It was not such a terrible battle, trust me." He still wasn't sure if he'd call it a battle. He'd won, yes, and the dragon had fallen. But it still felt more like a test.

She hesitated a moment. "Even so, you went. No one has ever... 'twas unexpected, that is all. The extent of my usefulness does not explain the interest and kindness you have shown since the wilds. You could as easily have ignored me entirely, yet you did not." She sighed. "You will need to forgive me for speaking so awkwardly... but do you suppose we have become friends, you and I? I have nothing to compare it to."

He smiled. "I would certainly hope so."

"Indeed? Remarkable. I have been with men physically, those who lusted after me and even professed love... but friendship with a man? I did not know 'twas even possible. Tell me, could there ever be anything more... between you and I? Have you ever considered it?"

His pace slowed for a moment. "I have considered it, yes." She had to be ten years older than he was, but he'd be lying if he said otherwise.

"And what about now? We could be together, you and I. As more than friends. If you wished it."

"I... I do." He looked at her. "I wish it."

"As do I." She hesitated a moment, then leaned forward and kissed him. "This, too, was... unexpected. We are not in camp, so come... let us continue what we are doing. For now."

He nodded.

#

Wynne sat down next to where Brosca was shuffling a deck of cards. He glanced at her, then dealt her into the game. She picked up her cards as Zevran and Lenore picked up theirs. "So tell me, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

Brosca shrugged. "It's better than being a casteless tunnel rat in Orzammar."

"I have learned a little of the strict caste system of the dwarves, and I apologize for saying this, but it seems terribly backwards. You seem to have taken to life as a warden."

He laughed. "It is nice to be seen as something other than a brand. I just hope I can show the strength Duncan saw in me."

She gave him an approving look before turning towards Lenore. "Irving told me about how you became a Grey Warden, and that unpleasant incident that occurred prior to your departure from the Circle."

Lenore added her bet to the pot. "I still can't believe Jowan

was that stupid."

"Stupid or desperate or just curious... he's not the first, he won't be the last. But that aside, you're a Grey Warden now and perhaps I presume too much by saying this, but the Circle is proud of you."

Lenore smiled broadly. "I am grateful that I can use my gift for something good."

Wynne gave her a proud look. "You are a true child of the Circle – raw power tempered with learning, wisdom, and the desire to serve others."

"I'm glad you came along, Wynne. It's good to have another mage to talk too."

"Have you encountered many abominations apart from the ones in the Circle Tower?"

"Well, there was Connor..."

"Ah, yes, Connor. Of course. The first time I saw an abomination, my blood turned to ice. It was months before the nightmares stopped. It was the knowledge that I could easily become one of them that frightened me the most."

Lenore gave a small shudder. "Seeing the monster that you could be is unsettling, yes."

"One slip... all it takes is one slip, and everything you are is simply gone... replaced by madness. And there is no turning

back. Or at least that's what they say."

"You have doubts?"

"Of late I have begun to wonder if... if there is any way an abomination can be... cured. Or if a mage could be so possessed and still retain their sanity. Their humanity."

Lenore watched Zevran put his bet into the pot, then folded down her hand. "If one retains one's humanity, one is not an abomination."

"Yes... it is madness and cruelty that define abominations. If those are lacking, if the mage remembers the person they truly are then... they are not an abomination. I never saw that. Thank you for showing me another way of looking at it."

#

"'Tis cold in my tent, all alone." Morrigan smiled at him playfully.

Jerath raised an eyebrow. He lifted his hands in mock confusion. "What do you want me to do about it?"

She chuckled. "Why, it just so happens that I find you... quite warm."

He gave her a serious nod. "Let's see this tent of yours, then."

"So you shall come to my tent?" She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "But whatever shall we do in that tiny little space

together while we wait for it to warm?"

He smiled. "I'll leave that up to you."

She held open the tent flap. "Good. Then let us waste no more time with foolish talk."

#

They were four days out from Redcliffe when they were ambushed. Brehan heard the twig snap underfoot and called out a warning. He wasn't quite fast enough. Sten caught an arrow in the shoulder. Morrigan caught one in the side. Lenore sent a fireball in the direction from which the arrows had come. Jerath was a pace behind the fireball.

Brehan had just drawn his blade when a mabari leapt down from some rocks and landed on him. It tried to get hold of his arm, and then Griffon tackled it, snarling and ripping with his teeth. "Good boy," Brehan said as he rolled back to his feet and joined the fray.

Jerath was raising his blade over the leader of their attackers when Leliana called out, "stop. Don't kill him."

He frowned at her, then looked down at the man laying at his feet. "You better have a good reason for this," he said as Leliana walked towards him.

"He is no common bandit. None of them were. Their weapons and armor are of fine make, and they are well-trained." She

looked at the man laying in front of Jerath. "You know what I am talking about, don't you? Who are you?"

The man coughed up some blood. "Someone who regrets taking you on. Was told it would be an easy job. Kill the little red-haired girl, deal with the others as we pleased." Brehan glanced at Saitada, who narrowed her eyes and frowned. Jerath touched his blade to the man's throat. The man pointed at Leliana. "Her."

"You... you came to kill me?" Leliana asked.

Brehan immediately moved to her side protectively. "Who is trying to kill Leliana?"

The man coughed again. "It don't pay to ask why someone wants someone else dead. I just need to know what to do, and where to get my money." He looked up at Jerath. "Ha, money! I'll be lucky to get away with my life, it seems." He gasped in pain. "Maybe we could work something out? You'll like the idea."

"Speak quickly," Leliana said.

"I've no real quarrel with you. Wasn't me that wanted you dead, but I know how you can find the one who does."

Brehan put a hand on Leliana's shoulder. "Your life for information then."

The man pulled a paper out of his beltpouch. "I have some

directions written down on how to get to the house. It's in Denerim. Here... it's the best I can do."

Brehan bent and took the paper, offering it to Leliana. "Thank you." She looked at the man. "No leave. I never want to see you again."

Brehan narrowed his eyes. "Get lost, before we change our minds."

"Don't worry. I'll not trouble you no more." He started to move, and then Jerath's sword pierced his throat.

"What... we said we'd let him go."

"You said you never want to see him again." Jerath shrugged. "You won't." He walked back down the hill to where Wynne was tending to Morrigan.

Brehan cupped Leliana's chin, and lowered his voice. "Does this have something to do with Orlais?"

Her eyes widened, and she looked at the paper. "It could. You may be right."

"We'll deal with it, ma'arlath." He kissed her. "I promise."

#

Wynne approached Cathiel after they made camp that night. "So tell me, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

Cathiel sighed. "Arl Howe massacred my family. Duncan helped me escape by conscripting me."

Wynne looked taken aback. "Arl Rendon Howe? The arl of Amaranthine? Why would he do such a thing to you?"

She drew herself up proudly. "I am the daughter of Bryce Cousland, teryn of Highever."

"You are..." Wynne's eyes widened, and then her face became sympathetic. "You are the last of the Couslands? I had no idea... my lady."

Cathiel sighed. "I always took my family and our name for granted." She thought back to the temple. She knew it hadn't really been her father standing there, but still, there were so many things she wanted to say.

"There is nothing I can say to ease your pain. I am sorry. It is not so bad, is it, being a Grey Warden?"

She found herself shaking her head, and glanced over at where Alistair was training with Jerath and Sten. No, it wasn't so bad. "I will do my duty, but I won't forget what Howe did."

"Rendon Howe will get what he deserves, in time. Such deeds cannot go unpunished."

#

As they broke camp that morning, Wynne matched her pace to Jerath's. "So tell me, how did you become a Grey

Warden?"

He gave her a wry look. "Is it my turn now? The short story? I met Duncan. He conscripted me."

"Ah, you are keeping this tale to yourself, I see. Fair enough. Forgive me for prying."

He watched her start to walk away. Then he sighed. "Duncan took me from the Alienage and saved me from prison."

She looked back. "Ah, I see. Do you mind if I ask what you did?"

He gestured for her to walk with him. "I killed the arl's son for hurting my friends and family."

"Oh, I...I'm sorry. I should not have brought it up. It must be an unhappy memory."

"Don't feel sorry. I'm not." He watched her a moment. "I'd kill him all over again if I could."

It was a moment before she replied. "You say that with such cold satisfaction that it frightens me. But I can see no fault in your actions. I would have done the same. It sickens and saddens me to hear what men in power inflict upon those they ought to serve and protect. I have heard stories that some Templars who hunt maleficarum do not end the hunt with a clean death. That they subject the victim to countless... abuses and indignities before they finish it. But this is just a

rumor."

"Sadly, one I can confirm. When Varla fled the circle, she came straight home. They came to her home with torches, though her family was still inside."

"Did no one stop them?"

"It is against the law, in Ferelden, to kill a human in defense of an elf."

"I... I did not realize that."

It was a minute before he spoke again. "Yes. They were stopped."

"I..." She looked at his face. "Perhaps I should not ask."

It was probably best that she didn't. He still remembered the look on his father's face when he'd come out of the house to find his son standing over the bodies of two templars, and the choking form of a third. "Varla left that night. I do not know what became of her afterward. We rarely learn the fates of those who go to seek the Dalish."

"Regardless of what happened in your past, I am glad you found a place with the Wardens, as I'm sure you are too."

"It is a good fight." He shrugged.

"I..." She hesitated, then glanced at him. "Thank you, for coming to my assistance, in the Fade."

"How much do you know of the Fade?"

"If you have questions, I will answer to the best of my ability."

"How much of the Fade is a reflection of reality?"

Wynne gave a small laugh. "I rather hoped you'd ask me an easier question than that. Many philosophers have struggled with that question. The Fade... it is part of Thedas, but separate. Place and time are less important than concepts and symbols. It can be shaped by dreams, and demons can change the landscape of the Fade to match what they see in the minds of mortal dreamers. They can be cruel, however, in the way they copy people and concepts of the real world, and the copies are rarely consistent. Belief and willpower are paramount in the Fade. It is shaped by perception."

"I went into each of your dreams, and saw what the demons showed you. Your fears, your desires. You fear failing your students. Cathiel wants nothing more than her family to be whole again."

"It is... strange, in a way, knowing you have seen my dreams. My nightmares."

"Your dreams tried to kill me. The injuries I suffered in the fade did not manifest as physical once we left the fade."

"No, they were injuries to your spirit, though nearly as fatal as the physical wounds might have been. There were a few moments after waking where I was afraid we'd lost you. But

physical changes short of death do not carry over."

"You are certain of this?"

"Yes."

"One cannot be changed by the Fade?"

"One can learn in the fade, but physical changes, no. The only way for that to happen is..."

He nodded. "Possession."

"Yes." She gave him a reassuring smile. "But, I was there in the fade with you, and clearly you are not possessed."

When he spoke again, it was in a quiet voice. "You are."

"I... you..." She sighed. "How did you know?"

"I see it. Faith."

"How?"

He twitched a shoulder. "I was hoping you might know."

"Perhaps something to do with your own escape. How did you escape?"

"I stabbed things." He twitched his shoulder again. "Let's just... leave it at that."

"Interesting. There are mages with a special affinity for spirits, called mediums. Many are healers, and can go beyond the more simple healing magics."

"The difference between what Lenore does, and what you did for me in the tower."

"You've read something of it?"

"A few times, when you've healed someone more badly injured, it... looks different."

"Perhaps you have some measure of that talent yourself. I've never heard of it in a non-mage, but... it would make sense. Being in the fade caused the talent to manifest."

He glanced over his shoulder. "I have not said anything to the others."

"Why not?"

"It is not a demon. You are not an abomination."

"I..." She nodded, then met his eyes. "If that... changes..."

"I will make it quick."

"Thank you. "

#

Alistair took her hand as they walked. "So all this time we've

spent together... you know: the tragedy, the brushes with death, the constant battles with the whole Blight looming over us... will you miss it once it's over?"

She leaned into him affectionately. "It makes me tear up just thinking about it."

He laughed. "There'll be no more running for our lives. No more darkspawn." He groaned. "And no more camping in the middle of nowhere." He rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. "I know it... might sound strange, considering we haven't known each other for very long, but I've come to... care for you. A great deal." He sighed. "I think maybe it's because we've gone through so much together, I don't know. Or maybe I'm imagining it. Maybe I'm fooling myself. Am I? Fooling myself? Or do you think you might ever... feel the same way about me?"

"I think I already do." They kissed. He grinned down at her. His voice was a bit breathless. "That... that wasn't too soon, was it?"

"No," Lenore's voice called out from behind them. Brosca and Zevran began registering their agreement with her. Cathiel shot them a glare before smiling at Alistair. She kissed him again. "I don't know. I need more testing to be sure."

He put his arm around her. "Well, I'll have to arrange that, then, won't I?" He almost immediately turned red as Lenore, Zevran, and Brosca began to call out suggestions. He shook his head. "Maker's breath, but you're beautiful. I am a lucky

man." He laughed slightly as he looked back to see Wynne bonk Brosca lightly on the head with her staff. "Now let's get back to... what we were up to before. Lest I forget why we're here."

#

Two days out from Redcliffe, they were hit again. This time, they had somewhat better warning. Brehan alerted them to the darkspawn well before the creatures closed.

Wynne healed a wound Sten had taken, and started to walk on. She was just about past where Jerath was standing when suddenly she started to fall. He caught her, bearing her gently to the ground. Lenore immediately rushed over.

"Unhh... I..." Wynne blinked up at them. "Fell."

"You're very observant," Jerath said, as he moved out of Lenore's way.

Lenore gave her a worried look. "Are you all right?"

Wynne shook her head. "For a moment there I thought I was... I thought it was all over..."

Lenore looked up at Jerath before looking back at Wynne. The others were starting to catch up to them. "Everything," Wynne said. She managed to get to her feet. "I... I will explain everything, when we are back at camp. Now is not the time."

Saitada gave her a worried look, but nodded. "Shale, mind

staying close to Wynne?"

"I will keep the elderly mage from tripping again," Shale replied.

#

Wynne looked up to see Saitada and Lenore coming towards her. She sighed. "I think I owe you an explanation for what happened earlier."

Saitada nodded. "Yes. You had us quite worried."

Wynne sighed, and gestured for them to sit. "You should know that... something happened to me at the tower, before you came along." She rubbed the palm of her hand. "You spoke to Petra, did you not? She told you I saved her from a demon. I..." She inhaled. "Did, but I did not survive that encounter."

Saitada shook her head. "Uh... This case of death is taking a while to kick in then." She glanced at Lenore, and all trace of mirth died. Lenore's eyes were wide, and frightened.

Wynne looked down at her hand again. "Let me explain fully. I engaged a very powerful demon to rescue Petra. It sapped me of all my energy and will, and left me drained. It took everything I had to defeat it, and when I was done I no longer had the strength to keep my heart beating." She closed her eyes. "I remember my life ebbing away; everything receded from me... sound, light... I remember being enveloped in

complete, impenetrable darkness." She reopened her eyes. "And then I sense a presence, enfolding and cradling me, whispering quietly to me. The sensation is impossible to describe. I was being... held back, firmly, but gently, as a mother would a child eager to slip from her grasp. I felt life and warmth flowing through my veins again. I began to be aware of small sounds, and the discomfort of my hip pressing into the cold stone of the tower floor."

Saitada frowned. She looked from Lenore to Wynne in confusion. "So you were never really completely dead then."

Lenore shook her head slowly. Wynne sighed. "The Fade contains spirits both benevolent and malicious. The benevolent spirits seldom make themselves known, because they want nothing from mortals, unlike the demons. It was one of these spirits that saved me. Without it, I would be dead. And it has not left me. It is with me, even now, bonded to me." She met Saitada's eyes. "You see, I am supposed to be dead. It is the spirit that is keeping me in this world, and this is not the way of things. Perhaps the spirit did not expect this but it is weakening, gradually. I am living on borrowed time."

"I can't believe you kept this from me," Lenore said.

Wynne sighed. "I didn't know if you were ready to hear it. But now you know."

Saitada set her hand atop Wynne's. "Then we will make the best of that time."

She smiled. "Yes, that we will."

Lenore shook her head, then shook it again. "I have so many questions."

Wynne gave a small laugh and Saitada rolled her eyes. "When don't you?"

#

"So have you heard? Morrigan and him are... you know."

Leliana gave Alistair a disapproving look. "Have you nothing better to do than to spread idle gossip? And besides, he can probably hear us both. You're not being very discreet." She shot a look over to where Jerath was taking point again.

"No, look, he's not even paying attention."

"Hmmm. maybe. You don't... think that he's serious about it, do you? The woman is a vile fiend."

"Well, look here, now who's an idle gossip? Me-ow!"

"You're the one who started this, I might remind you. And I'm... well, I'm ending it!" Leliana stalked away from Alistair.

Brehan gave her an amused look as she matched her pace to his. "She's not that vile."

"Maybe." Leliana glanced over at Morrigan, then sighed and went to match her pace to the other woman. She tried a

smile. "It's nice to see you two together. Love is such a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

Morrigan blinked at her. "What are you talking about? Is this more of your insipidness?"

"I... was talking about you and Jerath. You don't think the rest of us haven't noticed, I hope?" She began to wonder if Alistair had been mistaken. But then, he wasn't the only one to note that Jerath had spent the night in Morrigan's tent.

"There is nothing to notice. What you call "love" is nothing more than a wishful fancy."

Leliana shook her head. "Oh, you don't fool me! Deep down inside you must be glad of it."

"Let me tell you one thing, and then let us speak of it no more. Love is a weakness. Love is a cancer that grows inside and makes one do foolish things. Love is death. The love you dream of is something that would be more important to one than anything, even life. I know no such love."

"Oh." Leliana just stared at the woman.

Morrigan gave a slow, satisfied smile. "What I know is passion. The respect of equals. Things far more valuable that I'll not speak to you any further. Now begone."

Leliana dropped her pace back to match Brehan. "I hate her."

"I... heard most of that."

"Maybe you should talk to him."

"Right. It's been a few hours since the last time someone stabbed me." He frowned. "Maybe we should let Wynne or Saitada do it?"

"Are you afraid of him or her?"

"Yes?"

39. Chapter 39

Bann Teagan was waiting for them atop the castle steps. "You return. Might you have news?"

Saitada nodded. "What is Arl Eamon's condition?"

"Unchanged, I'm afraid." He gestured for her to walk with him as they entered the castle. "We've tried more magical healing, but nothing works. As time passes, I become more and more convinced the Urn might be our only hope."

She gestured for Wynne to accompany them. "We found the Urn."

Teagan stumbled. Hope lit his face. "You have?" Wonderful! Let us go at once to Eamon's side and see if the Urn's healing powers live up to their reputation!"

He led them to Eamon's room. The man was pale on the bed, his breathing slow. Teagan and Saitada stood back as Wynne bent over him, the pouch of ashes in her hand. Wynne's fingers glowed white as she anointed Eamon's face with the ashes.

A gasp came from Isolde as Eamon stirred on the bed a few moments later. The woman almost immediately dissolved into

tears. Eamon blinked up at the ceiling. "Wh-where am I?"

Teagan moved to stand next to him. "Be calm, Brother. You have been deathly ill for a very long time. Do you remember nothing?"

"Teagan? What are you doing here? Where is Isolde?"

"I am here, my husband." She sat next to him, taking his hand in hers and kissing it.

"And Connor? Where is my boy? Where is our son?"

"He lives, though many others are dead. There is much to tell you, husband."

Eamon's eyes widened with sudden realization. "Dead? Then... it was not a dream?"

Teagan looked down at him. "Much has happened since you fell ill, Brother. Some of it will not be... easy for you to hear."

"Then tell me. I wish to hear all of it."

Teagan glanced at Saitada, and began to tell the story.

#

Cathiel found Alistair lingering in the hall. He brightened when he saw her, and then shifted nervously. "Everything all right?" she asked him.

He inhaled. "All right. I guess I really don't know how to ask you this."

She blinked at him. "Are you sweating?"

"No! I mean yes. I mean... I'm a little nervous, sure. Not that this is anything bad or frightening or... well, yes." He paced. "Oh, how do I say this? You'd think it would be easier, but every time I'm around you, I feel as if my head's about to explode. I-I can't think straight."

"That's very sweet."

He took her hands in his. "Here's the thing: being near you makes me crazy, but I can't imagine being without you. Not ever." He kissed her hands. "I don't know how to say this another way. I want to spend the night with you. Maybe this is too fast, I don't know, but... I know what I feel."

She kissed him. "I thought you'd never ask." She drew him with her to their room. "And look, we actually have a..." She stopped short. "Bed." Said bed was sprinkled with flower petals. A bottle of wine and a tray of fruit sat next to it, arranged rather suggestively. "Your doing?"

"Um... no." He blinked, and then turned bright red. "I'm going to kill those three."

She caught his hand and pulled him towards her. "Later."

He kissed her, and then kicked the door closed before picking

her up and carrying her towards the bed. "Much later."

#

Eamon looked down at the gathered wardens and their companions. Exhaustion still showed on his face, and he had to sit in the chair. Isolde was practically hovering over him. "This is most troubling. There is much to be done, that is true. But I should first be thankful to those who have done so much." He smiled. "Grey Wardens, you have not only saved my life but kept my family safe as well. I am in your debt. Will you permit me to offer you a reward for your service?"

"We need your help against the Blight," Saitada replied, her voice strong and firm. "That will do."

Eamon looked confused for a moment, and then impressed. "I understand, but regardless of your motivations I feel you are worthy of a reward. I would like to honor your efforts, nothing more."

She crossed her fists over her chest and gave him the formal bow of Orzammar. "As you wish, then."

"Then allow me to declare you and those traveling with you champions of Redcliffe. You will always be a welcome guest within these halls."

"Thank you, your grace."

Teagan smiled, and then his voice grew concerned. "We

should speak of Loghain, Brother. There is no telling what he will do once he learns of your recovery."

Eamon nodded, his face troubled. "Loghain instigated a civil war even though the darkspawn are on our very doorstep. Long I have known him. He is a sensible man; one who never desired power."

Teagan sighed. "I was there when he announced he was taking control of the throne, Eamon. He is mad with ambition, I tell you."

"Mad indeed," Eamon said. Sadness entered his voice. "Mad enough to kill Cailan, to attempt to kill myself and destroy my lands. Whatever happened to him, Loghain must be stopped. What's more, we can scarce afford to fight this war to its bitter end."

"But you can unite the nobility against Loghain, can't you?" Saitada asked.

"I could unite those opposing Loghain, yes." He leaned back, considering. "But not all oppose him. He has some very powerful allies. We have no time to wage a campaign against him. Someone must surrender if Ferelden is to have any chance at fighting the darkspawn."

Saitada nodded. "Loghain must capitulate, then." She saw most of her comrades nod. Morrigan looked as if she couldn't care one way or another, and Jerath was expressionless.

Eamon set his hands on the sides of his chair. "I agree. LOghain will pay for his heinous crimes. But our armies must be reserved for the darkspawn, not for each other." He sighed. "I will spread word of Loghain's treachery, both here and against the king. But it will be but a claim made without proof. Those claims will give Loghain's allies pause, but we must combine it with a challenge Loghain cannot ignore. We need someone with a stronger claim to the throne than Loghain's daughter, the queen."

Saitada nodded. She knew what he was getting at. Alistair was the son of Maric. Cathiel was a Cousland. Alone, either had a strong claim. And if she was any judge, neither would be presenting their claim alone.

Teagan's face, however, showed concern. "Are you referring to Alistair, Brother? Are you certain?"

"I would not propose such a thing if we had an alternative. But the unthinkable has occurred."

"I think it's a great idea," Saitada said.

"Teagan and I have a claim through marriage, but we would seem opportunists, no better than Loghain. Alistair's claim is by blood."

Alistair shook his head. "And what about me? Does anyone care what I want?"

Eamon's voice was firm. "You have a responsibility, Alistair.

Without you, Loghain wins. I would have to support him, for the sake of Ferelden. Is that what you want?"

"I... but I..." He sighed. "No, my lord."

"I see only one way to proceed. I will call for a Landsmeet, a gathering of all of Ferelden's nobility in the city of Denerim. There, Ferelden can decide who shall rule, one way or another." His face became uncertain, and he looked back to Saitada. "Then the business of fighting our true foe can begin. What say you to that, my friend? I do not wish to proceed without your blessing."

"I say we proceed with your plan."

"Very well, I will send out the word. It will take some time to recall my forces and organize our allies. I would prefer to wait until that is done before calling the Landsmeet."

Saitada nodded. "We will be heading to Orzammar soon. I think it best if I keep Alistair with me for now. If he is the man who brings an alliance to the Landsmeet, it will look better for him."

Eamon gave her a surprised look. "I agree."

#

Cathiel took Alistair's hand. "We can talk to her."

"I hope so," he said. He curled his fingers around hers. "I can't be king."

She kissed him, and then started walking with him to Saitada's room. Saitada stood at a desk, going over a map with Jerath. Alistair started shaking his head the moment he walked in. "You can't be serious," Alistair said.

Saitada sighed, and then looked up at him. "I am. Alistair, I know we are asking a lot."

"No, you don't. You are..."

She slammed her hands down on the desk and stared at him. "Alistair Therin, have you forgotten where we first met?" Both Cathiel and Alistair recoiled. The kind, gentle leader who laughed alongside them was gone. Before them stood Commander Aeducan, princess of Orzammar.

"No," Alistair said, his voice little more than a whisper.

Jerath looked up from the map. "Duncan saw strength in you. Strength enough that he was willing to risk the ire of a Grand Cleric. Was he wrong?"

Cathiel blinked, and looked at him. "You think this is a good idea?"

"Are you asking if I think Alistair could be a king to whom I would bend knee?" He stared at Alistair for a moment, tilting his head as if considering the question. "Yes."

Saitada nodded. "You're a good man, Alistair. Do not underestimate yourself."

He nodded slowly. "Okay." He sighed. "I mean, I'm not saying if some other option doesn't come up you shouldn't leap at it, but if this is really what it takes."

She nodded, and then gestured at the map. "We are going to Denerim to pick up some more supplies. Then we are taking a ship to the Frostbacks, and heading in to Orzammar." She gave a small shake of her head. "I'd say you are about to get a solid course in how not to run a country."

#

Saitada waited until Cathiel and Alistair had left before turning back to Jerath. "I know you have people in Denerim, but I have another task for you." She waited for him to nod. "I spoke with a man named Levi Dryden. Seems there is an old Warden stronghold named Soldier's Peak, dating all the way back to the second Blight. It was abandoned about two hundred years ago."

"You are hoping there is something left we can use?"

She nodded. "We can part ways here," she said, pointing to a spot on the map. "Who do you want with you?"

He considered a moment. "Morrigan and Shale should be sufficient."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"Meet us at Orzammar. Any messages you need delivered in Denerim?"

"I'd rather not have anyone looking towards the alienage."

She nodded. Then she sighed. "You and Morrigan?"

"It a problem?"

"I don't know." She looked at him. "Are you even..." She shook her head. "You are fifteen. She's somewhat older."

"Is that your only concern?"

"She's an apostate. And her motives for joining us are somewhat suspect." She leaned on the table and looked up at him. "Do you trust her?"

"No."

"Good. Retaking Soldier's Peak isn't going to be easy."

"If it were easy, someone else would do it."

#

"I noticed you've been training with Alistair. You didn't strike me as particularly faithful."

"We've faced no shortage of darkspawn that can use magic. It seemed the sensible thing to do." Jerath shrugged.

"It doesn't have..."

"I'm not a mage hunter, Wynne. But this is an opportunity to learn, and I will take it."

"I suppose that's a wise way to look at it. One is never done learning."

"Would you like me to ask Morrigan to teach you her trick?"

"No... no I... I think not." Wynne glanced back at where the witch was engrossed in a tome. "You are quite taken with each other, aren't you?"

Jerath sighed. It really hadn't taken long for the disapproving looks to start. "You know about Morrigan and me?"

"Well, she's hardly discreet. The way she looks at you, it's as though she's completely forgotten there's anything of you above the waist."

"That's part of her charm."

"I've noticed your blossoming relationship, and I wanted to ask you where you thought it was going. She is a cunning woman, a maleficar. She will use you for her own ends."

"There's more to us than that."

"I am telling you what I see, and what my instincts tell me. And even if the feelings you share are genuine, this affair may not be the best thing for either of you. You are a Grey

Warden. You have responsibilities which supersede your personal desires."

"I know." He wondered how she could even question it. The woman had seen him fight demons and dragons in the name of their question.

She blinked in surprise. "And...oh... you know."

"I am a Grey Warden, Wynne." He shrugged. "Our stories don't have happy endings." Someday, the nightmares would come, and all that would be left would be a trip to the deep roads and one last battle. It was odd, sometimes, how much his life had changed since he'd first accepted his death and walked into the arl's manor.

"The last Grey Wardens in Ferelden... so much is expected from you. It hardly seems fair, to any of you. I look at you sometimes, and you are so young. You face death every day, you know you are unlikely to live long... does it frighten you?" Her tone was almost motherly.

"Had Duncan not recruited me, I would have been dead over a year by this point." He shook his head. "I suppose I fear only an ignominious death."

She gave him a steady look. "No, a quiet death is not for you. Your passing will be glorious, you will blaze like a falling star lighting up the night sky."

"Exactly." She was starting to sound like the spirit that

occasionally appeared when he inadvertently entered the fade. For a moment, he considered talking to her about it. But she'd likely insist on telling Saitada or Lenore, and... he still wasn't sure how he felt about what had happened.

"The first Blight in four hundred years and here you are, the fulcrum on which it all turns. Whatever happens, you will become a legend. And if we should prevail, even if you die, you will live on in the memories of those you sacrificed everything for."

"I suppose that's all I could ask for," he said. She really did sound like the spirit. He wondered if it came from her being possessed.

"And perhaps one day they will forget, but it will not erase what you did. Every new day that they see, will be because of you. And nothing in this world will ever make that untrue."

"I will do what I have to, because it is my duty." It was hard to forget duty when it regularly showed up in dreams. Some days, he was actually nostalgic for the times when all it did was advise him to kill every other person he met.

"A Grey Warden through and through. Selfless to the last, devoted to those you protect. I am honored to have served with you."

He sighed. "You do realize this is all going to my head."

She laughed. "I see you've kept your sense of humor through

all this. It will serve you well, in the coming days."

#

Brehan followed Leliana as she came over to sit next to Wynne. "I heard about... what happened and I... I don't really know what to say, but I feel like I need to say something. Sorry, perhaps?"

Wynne shook her head. "I do not need sympathy, so do not feel obliged to give me comfort. We all die, Leliana, and we all know it. How is this different?"

"Because... because it's sooner?"

"Is it really? I may die next year, or I may die tomorrow, shot through the heart by a bandit's arrow. I do not know for sure." She smiled. "The constant fear of death is enough to take the joy out of anything, especially life. Do not worry for me, or for yourself. Death will take us when it wills and till then, we shall live, truly live."

Brehan laughed softly. "Sometimes, Wynne, I think that you would have made an extraordinary keeper."

"I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me." Wynne glanced at Leliana before looking back at Brehan. "I meant to ask, what did you think of the temple and the Urn?"

"There was power there. What it means... I am not truly certain."

"Do you believe in the Maker?"

Brehan considered a moment, and then lifted his hand.

"Creators..." He held up his other hand. "Maker." He pressed his hands together. "I wonder if they are not simply two ways of looking at the same thing. Do you know Vir Tanadahl? The Way of the Three Trees?"

"I do not," Wynne said. Leliana shook her head.

"Vir Assan. Fly straight and do not waver. Vir Bor'assan. Bend but never break. Vir Adahlen. Together, we are stronger than the one." He folded his fingers together. "You see one. I see together. Perhaps we look at the same thing."

"I... had not considered that idea," Wynne said thoughtfully.

"I think I like it," Leliana said. "Vir Adahlen, together we are stronger than the one. We have each other, and we face only one archdemon."

Brehan gave Wynne a respectful nod. "Falon'din ghilana mir din'an, enasal ma dirtha. Sahlin, ma serranas mala dirtha, elgar nehn."

"What does that mean?" Wynne asked, her face clearly touched by his words.

"One day, Falon'din will guide you to death, and we will be blessed by what you have taught us. But in this moment, I am thankful to know you, and your wonderful spirit."

Wynne's smile trembled. "Leliana, turn around a moment, I'm going to kiss your young man."

Leliana laughed, and put a hand over her eyes as Wynne pressed a kiss to Brehan's cheek.

#

Zevran looked around the pile of dead darkspawn. "We... are ridiculously awesome."

"Don't get cocky." Saitada sighed, and then rolled her eyes as he laughed. "And not everything has to be an euphemism."

They moved on, heading up into the mountains. Wynne shifted her pace to walk next to Alistair. "Alistair, may I have a word?"

"Of course - anything for my favouritest mage ever."

"It seems you and our dear Cathiel are inseparable these days. Joined at the hip, almost."

Alistair gave her an almost wary look. "That's a bit of an overstatement, don't you think?"

"Well then, now that you're in an intimate relationship, you should learn about where babies really come from."

Alistair nearly tripped over his own feet. "Pardon?"

"I know the Chantry says you dream about your babies and

the good Fade spirits take them out of the Fade and leave them in your arms...but that's not true. Actually what happens is that when a girl and a boy really love each other -"

"Andraste's flaming sword! I know where babies come from!" Alistair said, over the laughter of those within earshot.

"Do you? Do you really?"

"I certainly hope so."

"Oh, all right then. Aww, look, you're all red and mottled. How cute."

"You did that on purpose!"

"Now, now Alistair, why would I do such a thing?"

"Because you're wicked. That frail old lady act? I'm so not fooled. I'm on to you now." He stomped off.

Lenore snickered. "Wynne, I think you might just be my hero."

#

It was about an hour later before Alistair again matched his steps to Wynne. He nodded towards Jerath. "So you know about him and Morrigan, right? You've heard?"

"I think I know what are you talking about, yes."

"And you agree with it? You don't think that it's... dangerous?"

"Dangerous for whom? Her? Or him?"

"Anyone. She's maleficar... and rotten to the core. How can he even... this can't be a good idea. She can't be a good influence on him."

"I will admit that the thought did cross my mind, several times. But look at it another way..."

"Perhaps he will be a good influence on her."

"You know, you are just too understanding about stuff like this. Can't you be more judgmental? I'm trying to rant, here."

Wynne laughed. "Oh, I'm sorry. You go ahead and rant, dear, and I'll just nod my head if you like."

"So you'll mess with me but... you can't really be alright with them."

"I have spoken to the young man, if that makes you feel better."

"I..." he sighed. "He's going to be careful, right?"

Jerath glanced back at them. "Alistair?"

"Er... yes?"

"Who here has killed a dragon?"

"Um... you."

"And who had a dragon stand on him?"

"Uh... me?"

Jerath glanced at Cathiel, and then back at Alistair. "Perhaps you should think of that before pontificating on our respective relationships."

Alistair blinked as Jerath walked away. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Then he looked back at Wynne. "He just insulted me, didn't he?"

"I believe that I am not going to get involved in this particular conversation."

#

Saitada watched Jerath lead Morrigan and Shale off to the north, followed by Levi Dryden and his wagon. If they were lucky, Jerath would uncover records, or perhaps even Joining materials. Anything that would help them. The Grey Wardens knew more of darkspawn lore than the dwarves did. She sighed. Such as how to actually kill an archdemon.

She turned back to the others, and gestured for them to keep moving. Denerim awaited.

#

Zevran made a tsk sound under his breath. "Look at you. Your weary stance, the dark circles under your eyes. Poor man, all this constant walking has gotten to you. Do you know what

you need?"

Brosca chuckled. "A good night's rest, maybe."

Zevran exchanged a look with Lenore. The mage smiled. "I think you could use more than that."

"Mmm..., yes. I'm thinking more drastic measures are called for, in fact." Zevran put his hand on Brosca's left shoulder.

Lenore put her hand on his right shoulder. "Indeed. With so much fighting, one does need to see to their health."

Zevran grinned. "My thought is this: We retire to your tent and I show you the sort of massage skills that one only learns growing up in an Antivan whorehouse."

"Why, Zevran, that sounds like a marvelous idea. And you know what else he could use? Some wine and peeled grapes."

"I like the way you think, my dear lady."

Brosca chuckled. "That sounds good to me."

Zevran looked over his head at Lenore. "A willing victim it is." He looked back at Brosca. "And if I might ask, if the opportunity to proceed past the massage should present itself...?"

"You know how these things can get," Lenore said.

"I'm sure I'll think of something," Brosca said, putting an arm around each of them.

Zevran grinned. "Then why are we still talking?"

"That is a very good question," Lenore said.

#

Brosca ran his fingers through Zevran's hair. Zevran grinned up at him. "See? I knew this would happen eventually. I should have warned you right from the moment you refused to kill me. It was inevitable."

Lenore giggled. "Here I thought I seduced you."

Zevran smiled with delight. "O-ho! Aren't you the saucy little minx, then?" He grinned at Brosca. "We've been used, and I wasn't even aware of it. A masterpiece."

Brosca pulled Lenore to him for a kiss, and then winked at Zevran. "She's practically a public menace."

"So then, as the priestess so famously said to the handsome actor: What now?"

Brosca sat up a bit. "I was about to ask you the same thing."

Zevran shrugged. "Allow me to make it simple for you, my Grey Wardens. What comes next is entirely up to you. I was raised to take my pleasures where they could be found, for they do not come very often. I shall ask nothing more of you

than you are willing to give."

"That sounds fine by me," Lenore said. She brushed a hand through her hair.

"I must admit, we have come very far from those early days when I tried to kill you and you decided not to kill me... fate is such a tricky whore, isn't she?"

"So, my question is..." Brosca gave Lenore a glance. "Where did you learn that little trick with the electricity?"

Lenore gave him a coy look. "A lady never reveals her secrets."

#

Griffon ran off as soon as they entered the market. Cathiel sighed. "I suppose he's just going off to do some shopping."

"We should do the same," Alistair said. "You need arrows, yes?"

"Always. And I think your shield is about done for."

He nodded, and they started walking towards the shop of Saitada's friend. They were halfway there when Griffon ran back to them, followed by a young boy.

"Puppy!"

Cathiel sighed, and looked at the dog. "Maker! Where did you

get that?"

Griffon wagged his tail and barked.

"If he comes with us, he's going to have to fight darkspawn."

The mabari looked back at the boy, then looked at Cathiel and barked again.

"I know he's too young. That's my point."

The dog went to his belly and whined.

"Then you should return him to his parents, yes?"

Griffon woofed, and then walked off dejectedly. Alistair shook his head slowly. "Wasn't that one of Goldanna's children?"

"All the more reason not to let Griffon keep him."

#

"What was that about children?" Saitada asked, glancing up at Sten.

"What were they doing? It did not look like it served any purpose."

"They were playing."

"That word means nothing to me."

Saitada laughed. "You were a child once, you must remember it."

"Yes. I remember days spent in study."

"They must play sometimes."

"Why?" He looked genuinely confused.

"They're children. It's what they do."

"Your priests clearly should have spent more time training you."

Saitada sighed. "Parents teach children to be adults, not priests."

"Parents?' Are you speaking nonsense on purpose? If you insist on speaking, use real words."

She blinked, then considered a moment. "What do qunari call people with children?"

"Tamassrans. But the imekari are not "theirs". They belong to the qunari, not the priesthood."

She nodded. At least that made some sense. "So they're raised by priests, but they belong to everyone?"

"Yes."

"An interesting method." She frowned over a selection of

breastplates, and offered one to him. "But play can be used for training, as well."

"What do you mean?" He examined the breastplate, then gave it a nod of approval.

She paid the merchant. "When I was very young, Trian would play a game with me. He would ask me a question about our history. If I answered correctly, I got a point. If I did not know the answer, he received a point. If, at the end of the game, he had more points, I lost, and he would send me off to the shaperate to learn and do better next time. But, if I had more points, I won, and he would take me down to the armory and give me a lesson in swordplay. He made training a game, and I loved him for it."

Sten considered a moment. "You are very good with a sword."

She laughed. "And I can recite dry, dwarven histories that would bore even you to tears. But there were stories of battles as well, and tactics, and what separated a good leader from a poor one. By learning from the mistakes of the past, we can do better in the future."

"Trian was your priest?"

"No. He was my brother. We had the same parents. Our father was Endrin, king of Orzammar. Trian was elder by some years, and would often see to my training when our father was busy with matters of state."

"I see. He did well."

"Thank you."

#

"This looks like the place," Brosca said, glancing back at Brehan and Leliana. "What's the plan?"

"A polite chat," Brehan said, touching the hilt of his axe.

Lenore laughed. "We'll follow your lead then."

Leliana went to the door, and opened it. Inside was a beautiful woman, dressed in fine clothes. Several armed men stood about the room. The woman stood and smiled. "Leliana! So lovely to see you again, my dear..."

Leliana shook her head. "Spare me the pleasantries. I know you're-"

Marjolaine waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, you must excuse the shabby accommodations... I try to be a good host, but you see what I have to work with?" She sniffed. "This country smells like wet dog. Everywhere. I cannot get the smell out. Even now it is my hair, my clothes... ugh."

"Why did you send assassins after Leliana?" Brehan asked.

Marjolaine gave him a distasteful look before turning her gaze back to Leliana. "So business-like, your companion."

"You framed me, had me caught and tortured. I thought that in Ferelden, I would be free of you, but it seems I am not." She shook her head. "What happened to make you hate me so? Why do you want me dead so badly?"

Marjolaine's face became amused. "Dead? Nonsense. I know you, my Leliana. I know what you are capable of. Four, five men... you can dispatch easily." She folded her arms, her voice smug. "They were sent to give you cause to come to me. And see? Here you are."

Brehan found himself wanting to simply step forward and punch the woman in the face. He smirked. "You could have just sent a letter."

Marjolaine looked at him with open disgust this time. Leliana shook her head. "Ignore what she says. She is lying. I know how she works."

"Lasa ghilan, ma vhenan," Brehan replied. He saw Marjolaine's lips twist into a sneer at the elvish.

"What are you up to, Marjolaine? Why are you in Ferelden?"

She shrugged, and her eyes narrowed. "In truth? You have knowledge that you can use against me. For my own safety, I cannot let you be." She scoffed. "Did you think I did not know where you were? Did you think I would not watch my Leliana?" Her tone grew mocking. "'What is she up to?' I thought. 'The quiet life, the peasant cloths, hair ragged and messy like a boy... this is not her. You were planning

something, I told myself. So I watched... but no letters were sent. No messages. You barely spoke to anyone. Clever, Leliana, very clever. You almost had me fooled. But then you left the Chantry, so suddenly. What conclusion should I draw? You tell me?"

Brehan exchanged a look with Leliana. Surely this woman had to be kidding. A Blight was in the making, and she thought she was that important? Leliana shook her head. "You think I left because of you? You think I still have some plan for... for revenge? You are insane. Paranoid!"

"The Blight is what concerns Leliana now."

This time she actually spoke to him. "Oh, is that what you think?" She smirked. "If I were you, I would believe nothing she says. Not a one. She will use you. You look at her and you see a simple girl - a friend, trusting and warm. It is an act."

"I am not you, Marjolaine. I left because I didn't want to become you."

Once again Marjolaine's voice became mocking. "Oh, but you are me. You cannot escape it. No one will understand you the way I do, because we are one and the same. Do you know why you were a master manipulator, Leliana? It is because you enjoyed the game; you reveled in the power it gave you. You cannot change or deny this."

Brehan shook his head. There was nothing simple about his

nightingale. "I trust Leliana, no matter what you say."

She smiled at him. "Thank you." She looked back at Marjolaine. "You will not threaten me of my friends again, Marjolaine. I want you out of my life, forever."

Brehan rested his hand on his axe. "She means go away."

"Leave Ferelden. Go back to Orlais and never return. What you do is no longer my concern."

"I see. I will go, for now. But you carry a dangerous secret of mine, Leliana. It is not over. Not for us."

"Sure you don't want me to just set her on fire?" Lenore asked casually.

"We could have our resident crow poison her," Brosca offered, gesturing at Zevran. "Or I could call up a few of my carta buddies."

Brehan touched his axe and gazed at Marjolaine, pretending for a moment that he was Jerath. "Ar'din nuvenin na'din, len'alas lath'din. Se telnadas. Dirthara-ma." He looked over at Brosca. "I think, if this shem comes near ma sa'lath, I will skin her and leave her to Fen'harel." His smile was savage. "Ma halam. Go."

She looked at them, and went.

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The other three bid them farewell, saying something about looking for pearls. Brehan turned to Leliana. "She's gone. I don't know what to think. She said it wasn't over." She sighed. "No- she was lying. She won't come back."

He put an arm around her, and she leaned into him for a moment. "If she does, we'll just sic Jerath on her and watch."

Leliana laughed. "What does ma sa'lath mean?"

He kissed her. "My one love."

"Say it again?"

"Ma sa'lath." He kissed her. "Ma vhenan'ara." He kissed her again.

"I love you too." She kissed him. "My vhenan."

#

"So how do landships work exactly?" Lenore asked.

"Magic," Brehan said.

"I get that, but what kind of magic?"

"Keeper magic." He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not a mage." He offered another of the roots to Brosca. He took it gratefully, his face pale. Saitada seemed to be doing better, but not by a lot.

"What did it mean, what you said to the annoying woman?" Lenore asked. "I mean, I assume they were threats. What does..." She furrowed her brow in memory. "Ma halam mean?"

"You are finished."

"What's the one you use whenever anything stabs you? Fenedhis?"

He chuckled. "Wolf shit."

"Durgen'len?"

"Child of the stone."

"Oh, I like that one. Durgen'len. What about the thing you called Jerath that time? Elvhen'alas?"

Brehan sighed. "Dirt elf."

"Oh. That wasn't nice." She frowned. "What about the other thing you call him? Da'mi?"

"Little blade."

"See, there are so many ways one could take that," Zevran

said.

Brehan sighed. "Da'assan and da'mi are generally used as affectionate terms for children learning to be warriors and hunters."

"What about..."

"Lenore?"

"Yes?"

"If I tell you a story, will you stop asking questions?"

Lenore considered a moment, and then shook her head. "I'm holding out for you singing again. You have a wonderful voice."

He considered a moment, then smiled and began to sing. Leliana snuggled into him as he did, sighing contentedly. Lenore listened with her eyes half closed. When the song died away, she brightened. "What's that about?"

He laughed. "It's called Suledin. Endure. It..." He shrugged. "Journeys are long when made alone, and you must leave when you are no longer welcome. But if you are certain, the path will take you home, and you will again find joy."

"Sing another?"

This time, he opted for a lullaby. It seemed to do the trick.

#

"Might I offer you a bit of advice, my good friend Alistair?"

"I like my hair the way it is, thank you."

Zevran gave him a dubious look. "Truly? As you wish... though my advice is regarding something else completely. It has to do with your recent... exertions with your fellow Grey Warden that I overheard."

"My...?" Alistair turned bright red. "Oh."

"It did seem as if you just got going when all grew quiet. You are... feeling all right, yes? Perhaps you are tired?"

"We aren't talking about this, are we? Did I hit my head?"

"I have some roots from home that you may chew if you need energy. As for volume, perhaps you ought to try arching your-

"Whoa! Whoa! Awkward!"

"You Fereldens are so finicky. How will you ever learn how to pleasure each other unless you talk about it?"

"Not listening! La la la la la!"

Cathiel shook her head. "Lenore, will you please come get your elf before I shoot him?"

Lenore giggled. "Actually, if you really want to increase

your..."

"Brosca! Make them stop!"

#

Jerath met them at the dock. Saitada grinned at him. "Find anything?"

"We retook the fortress, so we have an additional base of operations now. The Drydens are relighting the forges there, they claim its good dwarven engineering." He shrugged.

"Found some books, notes, and other things. Not as much as I'd like, the library was in ruins."

"Any trouble?"

"Not really, just some ghosts and demons."

"Most people define that as trouble," Brehan observed, helping Brosca onto the dock.

Jerath shrugged. "No Joining materials."

Saitada sighed. "I suppose it was too much to hope. What kind of notes?"

"Might be best to talk about that in a place with more privacy."

She nodded. "Let Lenore take a look when we make camp." Her gaze went to the mountains. "We've still got some walking to do, people."

#

Leliana actually jumped slightly when he put a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, hello... is there something you wanted to talk about?"

Brehan shook his head. "No, I thought you looked like you wanted to talk, though."

"It's..." She sighed. "It's nothing. I'm fine. I'm just thinking."

"Do share?"

"I can't get what happened out of my head. I'd been in Lothering for years and she still thought I was plotting against her."

"Ma vhenan..."

"She didn't trust me. Maybe she never did. She loved me when she could use me and control me, and now that she can't, she wants me dead." She leaned into him. "It... it hurt to realize that I never really knew her."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You are already helping so much by listening to me." She sighed. "I knew she was ruthless, but I didn't know how far she could go." She shook her head. "She is self-serving, cruel... she uses people, then discards them, but that's how she survives in the life she leads." She pulled away, and then turned to look at him. "W-what if she's right? What if we're the

same? I... I should have just stayed in the Chantry."

He caressed her cheek. "We would never have met, if you hadn't."

She shook her head. "You don't understand. I forgot my life as a bard while I was in the cloister. I felt safe. I didn't have to watch my back all the time." She ran a hand through her hair, and her voice became angry. "That's what made Marjolaine the person she is, don't you see? It ruined her; it will ruin me too. Even now, I feel some regret at not ending her life, in order to protect my own."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Isn't there? It's the first step down this dark path. First thought, then action..." She wrapped her arms around herself. "What we're doing... what we've done - hunted men down, killed them - part of me loves it. It invigorates me and this scares me. I... I feel myself slipping."

He pulled her to him. "You are a good person, ma vhenan. You always will be."

"How can you be so sure?"

He smiled at her. "Evil doesn't worry about not being good."

She laughed softly. "That... that is true." She kissed him. "I can always trust you to show me things from a different perspective." She drew away, but smiled. "I would like to be

alone, for now. I have many things to consider. Thank you, for listening."

He nodded, and gave her a small bow. "You are never alone, ma vhenan." He walked back to camp.

#

Saitada blinked when Jerath sat down a few feet from her and gave her a level look. "This is the third night you've stood watch. Trouble sleeping?"

"We will be at the great gate tomorrow."

"My father once said that home is the place where they know you, and welcome you anyway." His eyes met hers. "You aren't going home, are you?"

She sighed. "No." She looked at him for a moment, and then sighed. "I suppose that's why you didn't mind missing the trip to Denerim?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps one day, Soldier's Peak will be home. It's a nice fort." He met her eyes. "You should get some sleep. Tomorrow will be hard enough for you."

"I'll be..."

"Saitada?"

"Yes?"

"Get some sleep. That's an order."

She laughed softly. "Is this a mutiny?"

"It will be if you don't get rid of those circles under your eyes." He nodded at the qunari watching them. "And I'm pretty sure Sten's going to take my side on the issue."

"Very likely," Sten said.

"Fine. You two have the watch?"

"In the off chance a problem arises we can't handle, we'll awake you with the sound of our girlish screams."

She tossed a dirt clod at him and headed for her tent.

#

"About time a Warden showed! Loghain sends his regards!"

Saitada sighed. Brosca grinned up at Jerath. "Got ten silver says I kill one before you do."

Before Jerath could respond, a fireball exploded in the midst of their attackers, followed by the earth beneath their feet exploding and sending them flying. Brosca turned to glare at Lenore, and then Morrigan. "You mind? I was trying to gamble."

Lenore sighed. "Fine, I have ten silver says the next thing we end up fighting stabs Brehan."

Brosca snorted. "Like I'd take that bet."

Saitada wasn't sure what the string of elvish meant, but she heard Wynne express a desire to wash a certain mouth out with soap.

#

The great gate was closed, and a troop of guards stood before it. A human man in fine clothes and a small entourage was arguing with the guard. Saitada sighed as she recognized the guard. This was not going to be fun.

"Veata!" The guard's voice rang out. "This land is held in trust for the sovereign dwarven kings. I cannot allow entry at this time."

The human man drew himself up self-righteously. "King Loghain demands the allegiance of the deshyr or lords or whatever you call them in your Assembly! I am his appointed messenger."

Brosca glanced back at Saitada and raised an amused eyebrow. Saitada shook her head and let out a small laugh. Well, at least she could be sure Loghain wasn't about to get cooperation from Orzammar, with this idiot acting as his diplomat. The guard glared. "I don't caer if you're the king's wiper, Orzammar will have none but it's own until our throne is settled."

Saitada strode forward. "I have important business in

Orzammar."

The human gave her a haughty look. "None more important than mine."

The guard gave her an apologetic look. "Your business will wait. Orzammar must..." He looked at her again. "Wait, look at me. You're the exile. This begins with you. Sorrow finished what your kinslaying started. Your father is dead."

The human snickered. "Kinslayer? Oh, you're not getting in."

Saitada sighed. "My brother's death was a complicated matter."

Scorn filled the guard's voice. "Your conviction and guilt were entered into Assembly records. I suggest you leave and not compound this tragedy."

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jerath shift and raise an eyebrow at her. She gave a slight shake of her head. "I am a Grey Warden. This treaty obliges Orzammar to aid me."

Outrage filled the messenger's face. "The Wardens killed King Cailan and nearly doomed Ferelden! They're sworn enemies of King Loghain!"

That last bit, at least, he had right. Saitada offered the treaty to the guard. He looked it over carefully, his face a bit bemused. "Well, that is the royal seal. That means only the Assembly is authorized to address it. Grey Warden, you may

pass."

"What!" The messenger started gesticulating wildly. "She's a traitor! And a kinslayer! You said it yourself." He spat and blustered. "In the name of King Loghain I demand that you execute this... stain on the honor of Ferelden."

Saitada rounded on him, and he stumbled backwards, nearly falling to the ground beneath her glare. "Run to your false king. The dwarves will not hear him today."

"You... you'll hear of this. King Loghain will see you quartered!"

The guard actually smirked as he watched the messenger run off. "You are free to enter Orzammar, Grey Warden, though I don't know what help you will find."

#

She saw the look of awe on Lenore's face as the mage walked through the Hall of Heroes. They were nearly to the door when a dwarf in the robes of a scholar stepped out from behind a statue. He blinked, and surprise filled his face. "My... Your Highness! You live! We heard what happened." He walked towards her. "It was an injustice! My master is writing another book about the Aeducans; he believes that Prince Bhelen set you up."

She nodded. "He did set me up."

The scholar drew himself up proudly. "My master has not forgotten how you defended him from Bruntin Vollney." He glanced at the door, and then gave her an encouraging smile. "May Orzammar be kinder to you than the last time you walked the roads." He crossed his wrists and gave her a formal bow before walking away.

Cathiel watching him go. She shook her head. "How many people here are going to recognize you?"

Brosca snorted. "Most of them. I don't think really comprehend who she was to Orzammar."

"There will be plenty who don't know me anymore," Saitada said.

Brosca gave her a considering look. "I suppose you are right. You ain't as soft as you were last time you walked these halls."

"Cathiel, shoot him," Saitada said as she walked to the door. She glanced over her shoulder. "Zevran, mind fetching Lenore?" She sighed. "And maybe remind her not to touch the lava?"

#

They watched the fight. Cathiel watched Saitada. She could tell their leader recognized the combatants. She could also tell that their leader was absolutely furious, and hiding it well. She glanced at Jerath, and the elf gave her a nod. He'd noted it

too. Best be on guard. She wanted to offer some words of comfort. It couldn't have been easy on Saitada to learn this way that her father was dead.

A guardsman dispersed the combatants. He started to turn away, then he looked at them and his eyes widened. "Exile, you were not to show your face here again. I have enough crime to deal with, I shouldn't have to dump you back in the Deep Roads."

Cathiel watched Saitada stare him down calmly. Her voice was calm, polite, and very similar to how her father had sounded just before handing down a sentence. "I have a new house. The Grey Wardens."

The guard fidgeted slightly, then managed to find a bit of nerve. "That's right, you found pity topside. The Wardens should have better sense when choosing allies." He shook his head. "Surfacers and their cloud-addled heads. Fine, oh illustrious Grey Warden, what do you want?"

"The Blight is coming and I need Orzammar's assistance."

"Surface problems. Well, we have no king to hear you. You can join the shouting at the Assembly in the Diamond Quarter, if you want." He walked away muttering. "Bunch of deshydrated lords bickering over sand. Bhelen, Harrowmont... is one so different? No Paragons here."

Saitada jerked her head, and they followed her.

#

They'd made it halfway down the steps when Brosca saw a woman run towards them. He pushed past the others and met her at the bottom of the steps, hugging her tightly.

Rica stepped back, looking him over. "I can't believe it! I heard Grey Wardens had come to Orzammar and I couldn't help but hope... Look at you! My little brother, the returning hero! And with quite the unusual entourage..."

He laughed. "Rica? Is that you under all those jewels?"

"Can you imagine? As of last month, I'm a royal concubine to House Aeducan. They've moved Mother and me into the palace. You could fit our whole neighborhood just in the bathing room! I wish you could meet little Endrin. But they don't let me bring him outside the royal nursery."

Brosca blinked. "A royal concubine? To who?"

"Prince Bhelen! Can you believe it? Now you see why I didn't tell you. It just seems so amazing. My son is an Aeducan. The future king of Orzammar spends his nights in my bed! Beraht was a toad, but I have to thank him for teaching me to read, dance, massage, and whatever else Bhelen sees in me."

Brosca felt a slight chill. "But... Bhelen poisoned his father and killed his brother."

Rica shook her head, and touched his shoulder reassuringly.

"That's a horrible, vicious lie! Bhelen told me all about it. Lord Harrowmont always favored Bhelen's sister, the one who murdered Trian. Bhelen thinks Harrowmont set the whole thing up to frame him. Then he had the gall to whisper these things to the dying king. When the king sent him away... Bhelen cried for weeks. Tell me you don't believe these horrible rumors!"

Brosca glanced over at Saitada.

"You named your son Endrin?" Saitada asked quietly.

Rica nodded. "I wish the old king had lived long enough to see his grandson."

Saitada closed her eyes for a moment. "So do I."

Rica turned back to Brosca "Oh, brother, where are your manners? Introduce me to your friends."

Brosca swallowed and introduced the wardens, leaving Saitada for last. Saitada spoke before he could name her. "Does Bhelen treat you well?"

Rica smiled and gave a contented sigh. "He treats me like a queen. It's been a little scary, I have to confess. Some people are so angry with him... they'd come after us if they could. I had to sneak out to meet up with my brother. I'm sorry...I didn't catch your name..."

Saitada pretended not to hear the question. "Brosca's nephew, future king of Orzammar. Perhaps the dwarves will

rise to glory again after all."

Brosca gave Saitada a startled glance as Rica started speaking again. "But this isn't why you're here, is it? What's wrong? All the news from the surface says terrible things are happening. Darkspawn attacks and a civil war among the humans."

"A new Blight is beginning."

"Ancestors save us! I was afraid you'd say that. I hate this! Until there's a king, the Assembly would let the world collapse rather than bow to anyone's better judgement. But... I'm Bhelen's concubine now. I know his chief Lieutenant, Vartag Gavorn. He can help you if anyone can."

Brosca glanced at Saitada again, who nodded. "Great. Take us there."

Rica led them towards the Diamond Quarter. "He may be suspicious at first. Don't take it personally. It's been so hard to tell who's against us."

#

Vartag's eyes went wide as they entered. He stared at Saitada. "I heard you had returned to us, exile. What insult do you mean by coming here?"

Saitada merely shrugged. "I never got to congratulate my brother on his rise to power."

"It's difficult to believe that. After you left, many cruel accusations fell on Bhelen. He could only assume they came from you. Why should he trust you now?"

Saitada merely smiled. "It's part of the game. He won. I have a treaty compelling Orzammar to aid against a Blight."

"I have seen this treaty in the shapers' libraries. But it is only the king it compels, and your father has unfortunately passed. If you seek Bhelen's help, he can only give it from the throne. And only if no one stands in the way of his getting there."

"At least that would keep it in the family."

"If you wish to convince me of your good will, you'll have to show you've put the past behind you."

Saitada nodded. "If Bhelen promises me troops, I'll help him take the throne."

"So you really have thrown your lot in with the surface. Very well. As long as you understand that Orzammar is Bhelen's. I will allow you the chance to prove it."

"What must I do?"

"Harrowmont has been buying the votes of every deshyr he can turn, but he is running out of promises. Recently, he offered the same estate to both Lady Dace and young Lord Helmi. He hopes the vote will pass before he has to pay up. I have the promissory notes, but they know of my loyalties to

Bhelen. If you, on the other hand, brought them this evidence... They know you have little love for your brother and will believe you. Prove your loyalty and perhaps you'll get the reunion you desire."

"I'll find Lady Dace and Lord Helmi right now."

"Lady Dace doesn't leave the quarter much. But Lord Helmi's adventurous, likes to spend his time at Tapsters... in the Commons. Remember, don't tell them you got these papers from me. You learned of them and drew your own conclusions."

#

Brosca bit his lip as Vartag walked away. Rica was still staring at Saitada. "I remember you now... at the palace... you looked different then..."

Saitada closed her eyes, and inhaled, going still for a long moment. She opened her eyes, and looked towards Brosca. "These papers are undoubtedly a forgery. Whatever else Harrowmont is, he is an honest man."

Brosca glanced at Rica... "So what do you intend to do?" Rica paled again.

"Talk to Harrowmont first. Then decide. Brosca... Rica, I'll to everything I can to keep little Endrin out of harm's way. But we must do what is best for Orzammar and Ferelden."

Rica nodded. "If...If you'll excuse me..." She ran out.

"Brosca, do you want to follow her?" Saitada asked.

Brosca shook his head. "Give her a moment to calm down, catch her breath. I think she may actually love Bhelen."

Saitada sighed. "Yeah. Love does have a way of complicating matters."

#

They walked out of the assembly to find another dwarven noble walking towards them. This one bowed. "Lord Harrowmont sends his greetings, exile. He was surprised to see you back here."

Saitada gave an annoyed sigh. "I have a treaty obliging Orzammar to aid against a Blight."

"That may be, and that is a terrible risk for the surface. But even if the world would end tomorrow, Lord Harrowmont cannot ignore Bhelen today. He cannot afford to trust anyone of unproven loyalties."

Saitada took a step towards him. "Stop playing games. This treaty compels you to help!"

He drew back from her. "You're asking the king of Orzammar to send armies to the surface, but Orzammar has no king and we have no army. Right now, the men who should be fighting darkspawn are brawling in the street. If this situation is not

resolved, we face civil war! If you want Lord Harrowmont's time now, you'll have to prove you have no intention of turning against him later."

She shook her head. "So you would make the whole world wait?"

"If you wish to show you have no loyalty to Bhelen, then work against him in Harrowmont's name. Bhelen is hosting a Proving today, supposedly to honor his father's memory. The deshyrs take it very seriously. And unfortunately, Bhelen found some way to blackmail or intimidate House Harrowmont's best fighters into stepping down."

Saitada's narrowed her eyes, and then shook her head, her face almost amused. "Do you want me to find out why your fighters dropped out?"

"That would be... enlightening, though I hope you won't pry too deeply into things they don't wish revealed. If you wish to show your loyalty, enter the Proving as his lordship's champion. With your reputation, and your order's reputation, I've no doubt the ancestors would favor your arm."

Zevran chuckled. "And this is to be your king? One who cannot keep his own men from running like frightened children?"

Dulin sneered. "Lord Harrowmont does not use threats or intimidation to motivate his men. He leads by example."

"Ah, I see. So it's his example they follow as they cower from this Prince Bhelen?"

"How dare you slander Lord Harrowmont!" Dulin started to put a hand on his blade, and froze when Brosca stepped to Zevran's side.

"Why should we ally ourselves to someone too scared to even grant us an audience?" Zevran asked, glancing at Brosca.

"I see what you mean."

"Were I you, I would seek a stronger king than this Harrowmont."

Dulin stared at them, and then looked towards Saitada.

"Surely you don't mean Bhelen."

Saitada watched him for a moment. Then her voice came, quiet but firm. "I'm sorry, but I cannot support you."

"Then you and I have nothing more to say."

#

Brosca stared at Saitada again. Jerath's voice broke the silence. "In a city of stone, I can't imagine reeds doing so well."

"No. They don't. Harrowmont is a good man. An honorable man. But not a strong man. Not a king." Saitada's smile was bitter. "If he were... no use reliving the past. For better or

worse, Bhelen is the king Orzammar needs right now. Cousin Brosca, let's go find Lady Dace."

Cathiel shook her head. "Saitada?"

Saitada turned to look at her. "Yes?"

"Bhelen betrayed you. He..." She shook her head. "I don't understand."

Saitada sighed, and looked from her to Alistair. "Stone, but I hope you never do." She shook her head. "Cathiel, let's just say that Howe would find himself right at home in the assembly. Ferelden has honor. Orzammar has deshyrs. I spent half my life keeping assassins from killing my brother, and the only one I missed was my other brother. If Orzammar is to survive..." She sighed, and looked towards the royal palace. "Then it needs Bhelen."

"But..."

"Believe me Cathiel, I like this far less than you do. Harrowmont, for all I loved him as an uncle, will not be able to rally Orzammar in time to save Ferelden from the Blight. Bhelen can." She shrugged, and then glanced at Brosca. "If worse comes to worse, there is already an heir, and we can take care of the problem later."

Brosca raised an eyebrow. "You know, boss, you can be a little scary sometimes."

She shook her head, and then considered a moment. "Lord Dace will be at Tapsters. Take Lenore, Zevran, Alistair, and Cathiel with you." She looked her companions over. "Nobody wander by themselves. When it comes to assassins, Antiva has nothing on Orzammar. The rest of you, with me."

#

Brosca lay, looking up at the ceiling. Lenore's head was pillowed on his chest, and Zevran was curled up on his other side. He considered extracting himself and going to look for a drink, but looked down at the peacefully sleeping faces of his lovers and decided against it.

It had been good, seeing Rica. He was a little worried about her taking up with this Bhelen. He was, after all, the rat that had murdered his eldest brother and betrayed his sister. Still, Saitada had a point. This was Orzammar. Bhelen was a master of the game. And he made Rica happy.

Saitada was also right about there already being an heir. He glanced down at where Zevran lay. Asleep, his face at peace, the elf looked younger. If Bhelen did become a problem, they could take care of it, and manage to keep Rica and little Endrin safe. He could count on Saitada to want to protect her nephew, regardless of her feelings towards her brother.

He shifted slightly, and Lenore stirred. She looked up at him through sleepy eyes. "You are worrying again."

"A bit."

"They'll be back... that's not what you were worrying about, was it?"

Zevran opened his eyes. "You are afraid Saitada will change her mind, back Harrowmont?"

"I'm worried she wouldn't be wrong to do so."

Zevran shook his head. "Saitada knows the players of this game better than any of us, no?"

"Though it is a bit disturbing to see that side of her," Lenore said. "The dark side of the throne."

"Yeah, and my sister's all mixed up in it."

Lenore kissed him. "Everything is going to be all right."

"Or we will simply assassinate people until it is."

#

The others returned by the time the noon meal was being served. As they ate, Vartag came in. "Lady Dace just came through the quarter on a tear. She's telling everyone who'll listen what a leech and liar Harrowmont is. Good job." He gave Saitada a smirk. "It's touching to see how strong your love is for your brother. He's ready to see you now, if you wish."

"Of course. I've missed him so."

Vartag narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to assume that wasn't sarcasm." He folded his arms. "I warn you, be on your best behavior. And keep your weapons sheathed."

41. Chapter 41

If Cathiel wasn't familiar with her companions, she'd think this Bhelen fellow was going a tad overboard on his number of guards. As it was, she was pretty sure he could triple the number and it wouldn't be enough to save him from Saitada's wrath if that was the way she decided to play it.

Alistair gave her an uncertain look. She couldn't blame him. Seeing the nasty side of politics like this... no wonder he didn't want the throne.

"Well, who would have imagined..." Bhelen gave Saitada a slight bow, but his voice held a note of threat. "My big sister, back from the dead, and calling herself a Grey Warden. I could hardly believe it when Vartag said you wished to help me regain the throne."

"I just want to stop the Blight. You're my best chance."

He nodded. "You're right." He shrugged. "Harrowmont would bow and dandle you on his knee like a child, but he could never overcome the Assembly's resistance to your treaty." He leaned forward. "This is a time for action, not cultured debate." He slammed his fist into the table. "We need absolute unity to fight the against the fulcrum of true evil."

Saitada nodded. "There will be time for politics when the darkspawn are gone."

"Unfortunately, while this debate rages, I have no power to send the troops you need." He gestured. "You've seen for yourself; the city is a slaughterhouse. Criminals run lawless. I could never hold the throne if I allowed such chaos."

Saitada sighed, and rolled her eyes. She shook her head. "Maybe I could do something about that..." Her voice was slightly mocking.

Bhelen looked at her, then actually chuckled. "Jarvia and her carta are behind this bedlam. If you can eliminate them, I promise as king, I will send as many troops as you need to fight the darkspawn." He gestured at a map of Orzammar. "Unfortunately, Jarvia's base of operations is in Dust Town, and you know how little leverage we have there." He glanced up at her. "The casteless refuse to cooperate with my men. But now that you've spent so much time on the surface, you're practically one of them. Perhaps you'll have better luck."

Cathiel narrowed her eyes. She wasn't sure what that meant, and Saitada gave no reaction, but based on Brosca's expression Bhelen's words were insulting. Saitada merely smiled. "I'll go look for her right now."

"And I will wait eagerly for your return."

#

"I'm sensing there was a lot of subtext to that conversation," Leliana said.

"That sodding jackass," Brosca said. He paced furiously. "Who the sodding hell does he think he is?"

"The king," Saitada said simply. "Jarvia, you know the name?"

"Beraht's lover. She must have taken over after I gutted him. Can't say killing her wouldn't be good for Orzammar."

"She was involved with Beraht?"

"You knew him?"

"He was behind an attempt to poison Trian." Saitada nodded. "And you are right. Taking out the criminals would be good for Orzammar. Know where to find her?"

"Not off the top of my head, but I reckon I can find somebody who does."

"Lead the way."

#

"Well, chew me up and swallow me whole! I never thought I'd see you back here. What happened, duster? You miss getting spit on?"

"Miss getting you in trouble, duster!"

"I know. I've had to get all my trouble myself since you left. But you know, I got really good at it." He gave Saitada an admiring look. "Rowr, who is your friend?"

"Yeah, that's the longest story in the world."

"As long as I get to look at her while you tell it." Leske chuckled. "So, what are you doing here? Now crawling back to die in the Deep Roads yet, right?"

"I'm looking for Jarvia."

Leske gave a low whistle of warning. "Bad idea, my friend. You know she and Beraht were lovers - she still blames us for his death. I've been staying out of sight since you left, but I'm sure she's heard you're back in town. What do you want her for?"

"Can you just tell me where she is?"

Leske lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Look, she'd kill me if she knew I know this, but after Bhelen took Rica up-city, the carta laid claim to your old home. They put a back entrance in. IT just goes to some storage tunnels, but there's probably a way into Beraht's old estate from there." He glanced over his shoulder. "Now I'd better get out of here before anyone sees us together. But, uh, tell me how it turns out." He gave Saitada a last leer before scampering off.

"Charming fellow," Saitada muttered. "His information good?"

"Generally, yeah. This way, come on."

#

"You used to live here?" Lenore said, staring at the house.

"Heh, yeah. Seems a long time ago."

"I don't know, some paint, flowers, and a giant fireball, and it could be quite pleasant." Zevran said.

Wynne shook her head and sighed. Brosca opened the door, and then echoed her sigh.

"Well, look who we have here..." The first thug grinned.

"Jarvia said you were looking for trouble. Congratulations, you found it."

Brosca stepped backwards and glanced at Jerath. "Try to leave one alive."

The elf smiled, and stepped into the hut.

#

"D-don't kill me! Sodding ancestors, what do they teach you on the surface? You fight like a bleedin' archdemon." He crawled away from where Jerath was standing, and looked at Brosca beseechingly. "I was just doing what Leske asked! Said Jarvia gave the word to make sure you never left."

Brosca sighed, and shook his head. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Leske's working for Jarvia?"

"He told us he'd get you here. All we had to do was take you out." The thug whimpered. "You don't disobey Leske, you know? He's Jarvia's top man!"

"Now that part I have trouble believing. Where is he now?"

"I can't. You have to understand. Jarvia knows where I live. I-I got a little girl there. I tell you anything, she's the one who'll suffer."

"See the guy behind you? The one with the sword, covered in the blood of your half dozen buddies?" Brosca grinned. "I'm going to take him, and the rest of these very scary folks, and introduce them to Jarvia. Violently. Look at me, duster." The thug looked up at him, and swallowed. "I'm the guy that cut his way out of the deep through Beraht."

"The base is below the city. Y-you can get to it through the wall of the third house on this row. Put this token through the slot and it'll open." He glanced back at Jerath again. "Will... will you let me go now?"

"Yes. Go take care of your kid."

"R-really? Oh, thank you. You're a... a good person. How do you say it? The ancestors have shown their favor. Bless you!" He got up, and ran for it.

Lenore glanced at Brosca. "You okay?"

"Surprised. Leske almost did something smart. Cept he forgot who I was." Brosca cracked his knuckles. "Let's go remind him."

#

Cathiel glanced at Wynne. "I think our dwarven companions may be working out some issues."

"These events have not been particularly easy on either of them."

"Still, the rest of us seem almost superfluous."

"I don't know, I'm feeling kind of grateful to the criminal scum," Alistair said. He grinned when Cathiel shot him a look. "I mean, they could be taking their frustrations out on us."

Cathiel laughed. He had a point.

#

Jarvia folded her arms. "If it isn't our little runaway. Come back to finish the job?"

Brosca chuckled, and looked past her. "Leske, if you run now, you'll be able to get yourself a nice head start."

"What was I supposed to do?" Leske shook his head. "You were gone and Jarvia's pulling the strings. Not all of us got

your opportunities."

Brosca narrowed his eyes. "I never would have betrayed you."

"You got too much sun on the brain." Leske glared at him bitterly. "You forgot what it's like. When Beraht died, Jarvia came out on top. She's got the swords, she's got the coin, and she's got the bed where I sleep." He spat. "If you were here, you'd have done the same."

Brosca shook his head. "Leske, I think I'm going to introduce your girlfriend to mine."

Jarvia snarled. "When you taste my steel, think of Beraht. Even in death, he has his vengeance!" She started to step forward, and Lenore's fireball caught her full in the face, sending her flying backwards into a barrel. Which then exploded into another mass of flames.

Brosca couldn't help but laugh. The look on Leske's face was great. Behind him, the rest of his companions entered the fray. Brosca left his weapons sheathed as he went after his old friend. It was Zevran that pulled him away. "Amor, I think he has learned his lesson."

"Sodding hell, you killed them all." Leske spat out a tooth.

"You backed the wrong play, Salroka. You'd stayed loyal, I'd have set you up right."

"Who the hell are you people?"

Brosca laughed. "Ain't you been paying attention? We're the sodding heroes." He narrowed his eyes. "Get."

Leske got up, and ran.

"Feel better?" Lenore asked.

"A bit, yeah."

Saitada shook her head. "He going to be a problem later?"

"Eh, he's a bit slow, but eventually he does learn." He glanced around. "If I recall correctly..." He went to a door, and with a few quick motions, picked the lock. "Aha, the carta vault. I know we are still a couple weeks shy of Wintersend, but here ya go."

Lenore giggled. "There is something intrinsically satisfying about robbing thieves."

#

"Well, you've simply outdone yourself." Bhelen's face was smug. "They're talking all over the city about how someone finally went through Dust Town and slaughtered the carta like genlocks."

"We did what you asked. Where are my troops?" Saitada folded her arms.

"Not yet." He tapped his cheek. "Killing Jarvia brought me greater favor, but to truly displace Harrowmont, we'll need something dramatic enough to end the debate forever." He dropped his voice. "What do you know of the Paragon Branka?"

"Smith and inventor. She disappeared in the Deep Roads..." Saitada considered. "Two, three years ago?"

"She is the only Paragon in four generations and she turned her back on her responsibilities. A Paragon is like an ancestor born in this time. If she returned, her vote would outweigh the entire Assembly." He gave her a pointed look. "Anyone with her support could take the throne unchallenged."

Saitada narrowed her eyes. "If it will get me my troops, I will find Branka."

Bhelen nodded, his face smug again. "I was hoping you'd say that. So far, my men have traced Branka to Caridin's Cross: an ancient crossroad lost to the darkspawn four centuries ago. Her trail ends there. Perhaps with your Warden's expertise, you can find what my mind could not."

"I'll leave right away."

"You have my thanks. Seek her in Caridin's Cross. I will try to delay the vote until you return."

#

"Resupply, and run any errands you need. We leave in a few hours."

"Um... Saitada?"

"Yes, I know that we've just been asked to do the impossible. But scouting the Deep Roads will give us a better idea of where the next horde is going to pop up, could potentially give us the location of the archdemon, and note that I said nothing about finding Branka alive."

Cathiel nodded. "Okay. As long as you know what you are doing."

"If they haven't sorted it out by the time we get back, we'll flip a coin."

"And?" Saitada gave her a pointed look, and Cathiel's eyes widened. "Oh."

Saitada shook her head. "Triple check supplies. Not a lot of hunting options in the roads."

#

"I don't like politics."

Cathiel nodded. "I spent time helping my father. Ferelden politics really aren't anything like this." She sighed. "Well, except for Howe and Loghain."

"You aren't making me feel better about this."

#

Leliana gasped. "Oh! It's one of those subterranean bunny-pigs! Ohhh, look at him! Come here, you..." She cuddled the nug.

Brehan laughed. "He's pretty cute. Have fun."

"Thank you so much." She kissed him. "You've made my day."

"Just don't let Brosca near him. He was talking the other day about how much he missed roast nug."

#

"Y-you're back. I thought you weren't coming. What did he say?"

"Your father wants you both to come home," Jerath said, crouching down to look her in the eye.

"Both of us? I don't believe he said that. I've never heard him refer to my son as anything but trash. He calls him 'it!'" She shook her head. "But maybe... maybe Mother convinced him, or you did. Oh, my friend, I cannot thank you enough."

He pressed a coinpurse into her hand. It was filled with coin they'd taken from the carta hide out. "He changes his mind, or you just decide you want to build your own life, this should help."

She stared at him, and then before he could dodge she threw

her arms around him. "If this were a story, my son would grow to manhood and pledge himself as a knight in your service. When he grows up, I will send him to you. I promise!"

He detangled himself as gently as he could. He hated when they did that. He never quite knew how to handle someone clinging to him. "Take care of yourself, Zerlinda."

"I will. I..." She blinked. "You didn't tell me your name."

"Jerath. Warden Jerath Tabris."

"You are a good man, Warden Tabris."

Maybe. Though if people didn't stop hugging him every damn time, he might just rethink that. A group of thugs confronted him as he started to leave the slums. He chuckled. This, this he knew how to handle.

#

Wynne's face held disapproval. "Saitada said no one was to wander off by themselves." He raised an eyebrow, and then glanced to either side of her. She frowned. "Don't you take that tone with me, young man." She fell into step beside him. "There are assassins everywhere."

"A few less, now," he said. He'd divided up the coin the assassins had been paid among a group of beggars. Several of them had been singing when he'd left.

"What were you doing in Dust Town?"

"Killing assassins, making the world a better place."

"You know, you aren't too old for me to turn over my knee."

They were halfway back to the others when a young dwarven woman called out to them. "You look like you're not from around here."

"Yes, you could say that," Jerath said.

She beamed. "Oh, wonderful! I've been trying to find someone who really knows the surface world." She gazed up at him hopefully. "I-I don't suppose you've heard of something called 'The Circle?'"

Jerath nodded to Wynne. "My companion here is a senior enchanter of the Circle."

The young woman's eyes went wide with awe. "Oh, my lady, it's an honor. I've never met an actual mage. Is it true you can manipulate nature's forces with your mind? Like you were born with lyrium in your veins?"

Wynne gave her a kindly smile. "Don't let the glamour fool you, child. Wielding magic is a dangerous occupation and a great responsibility."

"Why is a dwarf interested in the Circle?" Jerath asked.

She threw up her hands. "I've been trying to reach someone there for years; I've sent missives with every caravan, but I never get a reply." She looked up at them hopefully. "I want to

know if they would accept me for study."

Jerath blinked at her, and then glanced at Wynne. She looked confused. He turned back to the dwarf. "Do you want me to ask them?"

Her eyes nearly fell out of her head. "That would be wonderful! My name is Dagna, daughter of Janar of the Smith Caste. Tell them I've already begun reading the Tevinter Imperium's 'Fortikum Kadab,' and it's just fascinating! Did you know the Imperial Magister Lords once had genealogies of every human family known to produce a mage child?" She squealed. "Oh, I'll go pack my bags right now! I'll be waiting by my father's shop!"

Wynne watched her go with a bemused look. "It might not be kind to get her hopes up."

"They'll accept her."

"You sound certain of that."

"A girl of the smith caste might know a few things about the lyrium trade." Wynne blinked and raised her eyebrow at him. He shook his head at her. "I do pay attention to a few things other than swords."

"One underestimates you at their peril," she said. They began walking again.

He glanced at her, and then considered a moment. "Do you

have any regrets at all?"

"I try not to dwell too much on the mistakes of my past, of which there are many. I would go quite mad if I did that." She sighed. "But I do have one regret - the greatest misstep of my life, made even more grave because it had dire consequences for someone else."

"Tell me."

She sighed. "Years ago, I was assigned as mentor to a laid, Aneirin. He was my first apprentice. Aneirin was an elf, raised in one of the elven Alienages, and he was very mistrustful of humans, especially humans in authority."

"I can see how this could be trouble." And he could relate, quite strongly.

"What Aneirin needed was time. Time to get used to his new home, time to emerge from his shell so we could build a rapport. I gave him no such time. I was young and arrogant. 'He is a mage,' I thought, 'he needs to grow up and act like one.' I expected too much from him, too quickly. I gave no consideration to his origin, or his feelings. And he retreated further from me. All I could think of was how stubborn he was, how he was throwing away all his talent and his potential, just to be difficult."

"Was he talented?"

Her eyes became fond. "Oh, very much so. Sometimes I

would catch him practicing on his own, but if I asked him to show me what he could do, he would freeze up, or fumble terribly." She sighed. "You cannot plant crops in the cold wintry ground; you cannot teach a student who is closed off and unresponsive. Patience is what is needed, and I learned that too late to help him."

"What happened to Aneirin?"

"Aneirin ran away from the Circle, one night. I had berated him over some trivial, ridiculous matter that I no longer remember. I drove him away because of something utterly unimportant. He was a child, fourteen at the time of his leaving. They had his phylactery and they hunted him down..."

"Why didn't they just bring him back to the tower?"

She shook her head. "They called him 'maleficar': a mage who practices forbidden magic, deserving of death. He was a child, misunderstood and lost. I begged the templars to tell me if he suffered, if they gave him a quick death. I got no answers from them. I was his mentor and they wouldn't even tell me what became of him."

"That was cruel of them."

"I should have known better. I had the best mentors; they were kind, compassionate... why didn't I learn from them?" She sighed. "I failed Aneirin. All I had to do was listen to him. He would try to talk to me, and I would tell him to concentrate on his spells. He talked about the Alienage sometimes... and

the Dalish. He always talked about looking for Dalish elves."

"Maybe he did find the Dalish."

"The templars are well-trained and thorough. That he still lives... it would be a vain hope." She smiled. "The apprentices that came after Aneirin benefited greatly from the lessons I learned from him. In a sense, he was my teacher, and I his student."

"See, there is a bright side."

"And there it is. My story. My one greatest regret." She looked at him. "Thank you for listening."

#

"Wynne?"

"Yes, Alistair?"

"My shirt has a hole in it." Cathiel rolled her eyes. Maybe he'd have better luck convincing Wynne to sew it than he'd had asking her.

"I see. And?"

"Can you mend it? When we make camp?"

Wynne sighed. "Can't you mend your own clothes? Why do I have to do it?"

"Sometimes I pick up too much fabric and it ends up all puckered and the entire garment hangs wrong afterward. And you're... you know, grandmotherly. Grandmothers do that sort of thing, don't they? Darning socks and whatnot. You don't want me to have to fight darkspawn in a shirt with a hole, do you? It might get bigger. I might catch cold."

"Oh, all right," Wynne said. Cathiel wondered if it was out of the kindness of her heart, or just to make him stop pestering her. She smiled fondly. "I'll mend your shirt the next time we set up camp."

"Ooh! And while you're at it, the elbows kind of need patching too..."

"Careful, young man, or puckered garments may be the least of your problems."

"Wynne?"

"Yes, Brehan?"

"My shirt still has a hole in it from where I got stabbed by that assassin."

"I know that you know how to sew a decent patch, young man."

"Yes, but since I was stabbed while keeping them from getting to you..."

"Fine. Leave your shirt."

"Wynne?"

"What, Lenore?"

"Since you are already going to be sewing, could you maybe take a look at the seam of my robes?"

"Yes, yes, alright."

"Wynne?" She just turned to glare at Brosca. He grinned up at her. "Don't suppose you could take a look at the clasp on my cloak? It's coming a little loose and..."

"Fine."

Jerath entered the room. "Hey, Wynne?"

"Young man, if you ask me to sew, mend, or look at any piece of your clothing, I am going to turn you into a frog! Or a nug! Or maybe just..."

He blinked at her. "Uh..."

"Fine, add it to the pile. I'll sew it when I have a moment."

"I found a book I thought might interest you in one of the shops." He held it out.

She took it from him. "Oh. Thank you, sweetie."

He nodded, and backed slowly out of the room.

42. Chapter 42

They were on their way to the gate when another dwarf stopped them. "There you are. I thought I'd spoken to a Grey Warden, but for some reason I'd chalked it up to the drink." He walked towards Branka. "Ah, I know you're down here to look for Branka, and, uh, I need to ask a favor."

Brosca nodded. "You've been trying to get help to find Branka, right?"

Oghren nodded. "Aye, I have. For all the sodding good it's done me." He shook his head angrily. "I'm the only one who still cares about her as a person. Everyone else thinks she's just a symbol they can leave in the Deep Roads where she can't offend anyone. I know what Branka wanted and how she was looking. You, presumably, know everything Bhelen's scouts have discovered about where she disappeared. If we pool our knowledge, we stand a chance of finding Branka. Otherwise, good sodding luck."

Brosca glanced over at Saitada, who nodded. "Sounds like we have a deal," he said.

"You should know that Branka was looking for the Anvil of the Void, the secret to building golems, which was lost centuries ago." Brosca glanced at Shale as Oghren kept talking. "The

smith Caridin built it, and with it, Orzammar had a hundred years of peace, while it was protected by the golems forged on the Anvil. As far as anyone knows, the Anvil was built in the old Ortan Thaig. Branka planned to start looking there, if she could ever find it. All she knew was that it was past Caridin's Cross. No one's seen that thaig for five hundred years."

Saitada nodded. "Bhelen gave us a map. I can get to Caridin's Cross."

"If we're going, let's get moving. Branka's not going to sodding find herself." Oghren began walking towards the gate.

"Don't we have enough armed lunatics following us?" Brehan asked.

"So what's one more?" Lenore asked.

#

"You look uncomfortable."

"There is a lot of rock above our heads," Brehan said.

Brosca chuckled. "I remember the first time I came to the surface, and saw all that sky. Took me most of the first week to stop getting dizzy every time I looked up."

"Keeps feeling like I'm going to run out of air."

"That's actually happened in a few forges that burned the wrong..."

"Not helping."

"Don't worry, the tunnels around here are mostly stable. Of course, when we get a little further in..." Brosca said.

"Not helping."

"See deepstalkers and other creatures burrow through and can destabilize fortification and..."

"Still not helping."

"Nah, we'll be fine. I'm sure we won't hit any of those gas pockets where a single spark can make the very air explode, causing a massive collapse."

"Emma shem'nan, len'alas."

"Or a wall weakened by lava that will just come flooding out the moment the..." Brosca ran, ducking past Sten and Saitada as Brehan gave chase.

Saitada glanced up at Sten. "At least morale is high."

"Indeed."

#

"I have been mistaken."

Saitada blinked up at Sten. "You only noticed this now?"

The corners of his mouth twitched slightly. "Enjoy this while it lasts. It won't happen again. You are a soldier worthy to stand among the Beresaad. I did not think so when we first met."

"Thank you," she said, oddly touched by his words.

"You are welcome."

"The day will come when the arishok sends us here. On that day, I will not look to find you on the battlefield."

"I hope I won't see you then, too." It was daunting to consider there may come a time when they stood on opposite sides. She could only hope that day was far away. Or better yet, that it could be avoided entirely.

"There is no point in dwelling on it. We should move on."

She walked next to him for a while. "So what do you believe in, then?"

"When your people join us, you'll find out."

"What do you mean?"

"Our ships will come to these shores. And the antaam will bring this land to the Qun. I will... hope that I do not live to see that day."

"Do you find Ferelden very strange?"

"To put it lightly." He shook his head. "No one has a place

here. Your farmers wish to be merchants. The merchants dream of being nobles, and the nobles become warriors. No one is content to be who they are."

"You sound a bit homesick."

He sighed. "Perhaps. It is strange to be in a crowd and hear a language that is not your own. To see faces that are and aren't like yours." He glanced down at her, and she nodded in understanding. "I miss the smells of Seheron. Tea and incense and the sea. Ferelden smells of wet dogs."

She shook her head. "You left out the rotting garbage."

"True. I was trying to forget that part."

"Is there anything you like about Ferelden?"

He hesitated a moment. "There is... interesting food here." His voice was almost grudging. "You have a thing... it doesn't have a word in the qunari tongue. Little baked things, like bread, but sweet, and crumbly."

"Cookies?"

"Yes!" She almost laughed at the enthusiasm of his answer. "We have no such things in our lands. This should be remedied."

"Perhaps when this whole little Blight thing is over, you and I can visit Seheron together, and introduce your people to the marvel of ginger snaps."

He glanced at her. "I would like that, kadan."

#

"Darkspawn ahead." Brehan narrowed his eyes. "Couple dozen genlocks, about twenty hurlocks. Two genlock alphas, a genlock emissary, four shrieks, and what may be an ogre on the edge of my senses."

"Alphas prolly means there are traps," Brosca added.

"Think you two could sneak closer, get a better look at the lay of the land?"

"Back in a minute, boss."

Saitada nodded and looked at her companions. "Wardens in first. Jerath, focus on the shrieks. Morrigan, back him up. Wynne, keep to the back, focus on healing. Leliana, stay with Wynne, keep a fall back point clear for her to work. Oghren, hold rear guard, make sure nothing comes up on us from behind."

She waited for Brehan and Brosca to report back before calling the rest of the tactics. After so long fighting together, they moved like the gears of a great machine. Sten moved a pace behind her, his greater reach and long blade allowing him to carve through the hurlocks while her shield provided defense for them both. Brosca and Zevran stayed at Lenore's side, their blades making short work of any who dared to attack the mage as she worked her spells over the field.

Saitada blinked as Lenore managed to call up what appeared to be a great storm of lightning, dealing mass destruction to all the genlocks within its path.

She used her shield to knock a hurlock off balance, and Sten brought his blade down. The field was clear. "Report?" She cast her senses over their companions. Either their luck was holding, or Lenore's resistance potion was doing its job. Likely both.

"I lost a knife. Other than that, I think we are good," Brosca said. "Songbird actually managed to get through a fight without something trying to eat him."

"Brehan?" Jerath said.

"Yes?"

Jerath tossed him something. Brehan glanced at the sword hilt. "Elven work." He turned it over in his hand. "How did it get here?"

#

"Caridin's Cross!" Oghren shook his head. "I can't believe Bhelen actually tracked this place down." He gestured. "This used to be one of the biggest crossroads in the old empire. You could get anywhere from here. Including Ortan Thaig."

"See any sign of Branka yet?"

"Not a one, but trust me, we will one we're on the path to the

old Ortan Thaig. She was going to Caridin's home."

"What's so important about Ortan Thaig?" Cathiel asked.

"It's the home of Caridin, the Paragon who made the Anvil. He was an Ortan before he founded his own house, and even then, he spent most his time in their thaig. Branka figured it was the best guess for where the Anvil was located."

"What is this anvil, anyway?" Cathiel asked, glancing at the respective dwarves.

"No one but Caridin ever really knew more than it had some kind of Stone-blessed power. Every golem who ever ranged across the empire was hammered on the steel of that Anvil, but no one ever knew exactly how they were made. But Branka was sure she could find out."

Cathiel glanced at Shale. "So you know where it is?"

"No."

"But if you were made there?"

"I do not remember."

"But..."

"Do you remember the day you were born?" Jerath asked Cathiel.

"I... suppose you have a point, there."

#

Brehan let the last notes of the eulogy die away. Returning the pieces of the blade to the tomb seemed a good enough use of their accidental side trip. They ate before backtracking and going down the other path.

The ruins were fascinating. Any other day, he'd love to take Leliana and spend time exploring. He sensed something, and turned to Saitada. "Ghoul."

"You sure?"

"Something between a darkspawn and one of us. Seems the logical conclusion."

"Tread careful."

They moved in, and more of those spiders dropped from the ceiling. Lenore gave a vexed shout before simply setting the nest on fire. They had to duck under the ruined buildings to avoid falling debris. Lenore gave them an apologetic look. "I'm really starting to not like spiders."

"I understand your feelings on the matter. Could you please not set the air on fire?" Brehan asked.

"Sorry."

"Good thing there weren't any of those gas pockets, eh Songbird?" Brosca elbowed him.

"Dread wolf take you, dwarf." He shook his head. "I hate the Deep Roads."

"Heh," Oghren said. "You're in the wrong line of work."

#

Lenore approached the twisted dwarf. "There's nothing for you here!" he shouted at her. "It's mine! I've claimed it!"

"Claimed it? Are you part of the clan who lived here?"

"The clan...? No. But it's still mine! Ruck's been here for years now, and no shiny surfer will take him away!"

She heard Oghren behind her. "Bah! He's a bloody scavenger, good as sodding gone."

The ghoul waved his hands at them. "Begone, you! You'll bring the dark ones back, you will! They'll crunch your bones!"

Oghren spat in disgust. "Word has it you can only survive down here by eating the darkspawn dead."

"Darkspawn blood is poison," Lenore said, glancing back at him. "Men have died from drinking it." She still had nightmares about Daveth.

"It burns when it goes down. It burns!" He gestured wildly before running off. "It's my claim, not yours! Crunch your bones!"

She went after him. She dimly heard Saitada yell for her to come back. Brosca and Zevran almost immediately came after her. She followed the ghoul to a campsite, and blinked.

"Go away!" He yelled. "This is mine! Only I gets to plunder its riches!"

"Is this Branka's campsite?" she asked him.

He pounded his chest. "It's mine! I'm the one who found it. I drove out the crawlers. Now it's mine!"

"Was this campsite here when you found it?" She could see some exploration equipment left behind.

"Everything was here. Everything the crawlers did not already take! Rocks and tents and worms! It's all mine!"

She smiled, crouched down, and held out a hand to him. "I'm not here to steel anything, I promise."

He came towards her, his eyes mesmerized. "Pretty lady... pretty eyes, pretty hair... smells like the steam of burning water, blue as the deepest rock." He stopped a couple feet from her, and looked up at her hopefully. "So... the pretty lady won't take anything from Ruck? You won't take Ruck's shiny worms and pretty rocks?"

"I just want to talk. I won't take anything."

"Oh." He came a bit closer, and sat down by her. "Ruck not mind that, maybe..."

"So your name is Ruck?" This close, she could feel the taint in him. It occurred to her that without the potions she'd brewed on the way to Ostagar, this is what Brehan would have become.

"Ruck not pretty name, not pretty like lady. Ruck is small and ugly and twisted."

"I think I met your mother. Is her name Filda?"

He threw himself backwards, legs kicking. "N-n-n-no. No Filda. No mother. No warm blanket and stew and pillow and soft words! Ruck doesn't deserve good memories. No-no-no-no-no-

She tried putting a hand on his shoulder to calm him. "Your mother misses you. She asked me to find you."

He shuddered. "Sh-she did not know, not what I did. I was very, very, very, very angry and then someone was dead. They wanted to send Ruck to the mines. If I went to the mines, sh-she would know. Everyone would know. So I came here, instead." His voice became small. "It is better now."

"How did you survive here?" She saw Brosca and Zevran looking around, and tried to keep Ruck talking.

"When the dark ones were here, I kept to the shadows. They don't look in the shadows, not if you're quiet. Not if you eat their flesh. Then the dark ones think you're one of them. They leave you alone." His voice became sad. "But now they're

gone."

"Do you know where the 'dark ones' went?"

He smiled up at her, as if happy to help. "I thinks they went south, pretty lady. Far, far to the south. That is where the dark master calls them with his beautiful voice. So much joy when he awoke!" His voice became wistful. "After the dark master awoke, he called his children and they all went. I wanted to go, too, and gaze upon his beauty."

Could it be he could sense the location of the archdemon?
"Where is the dark master now? Do you know?"

"He stopped calling. I wish I could go see him, but Ruck, no, no, Ruck-Ruck is a coward." He looked at her, then touched her hand. His voice became almost hopeful. "You know, do you not? Ruck sees, yes. He sees the darkness inside you."

"I am a Grey Warden."

He smiled at her. "Grey like the stone. Guardian against the darkness. Beautiful like waterfalls under the lichen."

She found her heart going out to the poor creature. "You have to tell your mother you're alive."

His eyes filled with tears. "No, no, no! She cannot... She remembers a boy, a little boy, with bright eyes and a hammer and she cannot see this! Swear-promise-vow you won't tell!"

"Would you rather she think you're dead?"

"Yes! Yes." He nodded wildly. "T-tell the mother Ruck is dead. He's dead and his bones are rotting in the crawler's webs and she should never look again."

"All right." She patted his hand. "I'll tell her you died bravely."

His face became almost worshipful. "Pretty lady is like Mother, yes. Too good, too pretty for the darkness. H-how can Ruck serve you with thank yous?" He scampered away, then came back with something wrapped in a tattered blanket. "Here-here, take this."

She accepted, then considered a moment. "Do you have anything to trade?"

"For you, yes. Ruck has many things. He can give them, and you don't even have to give him shiny coins, no? But you can if you want."

Lenore continued talking to Ruck as the others examined the camp. She bid the ghoul a sad farewell when Saitada indicated it was time to move on. After a moment, she offered him a vial. "Ruck, if it ever burns too much, and you don't... if you want to go to sleep and never wake again, you can drink this."

He clutched the vial to him as if she'd given him the world. "Pretty lady sings like the veins of lyrium."

"Goodbye, Ruck."

"Goodbye."

After they were out of sight, Brosca fell into step on one side of her, Zevran on the other. "You okay, Fireball?"

"I can't help but wonder how many of the soldiers at Ostagar have ended up like that." She sighed. She looked ahead to where Brehan was walking, his back tense and angry. "Or Brehan's friend, Tamlen." She shook her head. "Us, one day."

"What do you think I'm keeping Zevran around for? We start talking about crunching bones, he stabs us."

"Only out of love," Zevran said.

She smiled, and then blinked. She unwrapped the item Ruck had given her. Zevran let out a small whistle. "That... that is a nice sword."

She offered it to him, hilt first. "Looks like it might suit you."

#

"By the tits of my ancestors, Ortan Thaig. I never thought I'd see this place in the flesh." He narrowed his eyes at a section of wall. "I can see Branka all over this place. She always took chips from the walls at regular intervals when she was in a new tunnel - check their composition." He considered a moment. "If she was still here, though, she'd have sentries out by now."

Saitada nodded, and kept moving forward. Brehan took point,

but she'd warned him not to get out of sight of the rest of them. Too many tunnels.

They were examining another set of ruins when Saitada heard one of the sounds she dreaded most.

"Oops," Lenore said.

Saitada turned to see a demon rising from a glowing altar. It looked like the same sort of creature Uldred had turned into.

After they'd put it down, Saitada strode over to Lenore. Lenore looked down at her feet. "Care to explain?"

"I found a power nexus. Activating it must have triggered the altar."

"Why were you activating a power nex... no, never mind. I don't want to know." Saitada gestured angrily. "We are about to wander into an area teeming with darkspawn, and thanks to you our best fighter now has a dislocated shoulder, Alistair has a broken nose, and Sten was nearly disemboweled."

"I'm sorry..."

"You're sorry? You were sorry when you spread ashes on a rock. You were sorry when you woke up a golem with a non-functioning control rod. You were sorry when you brought a dragon down on us. Does someone have to die before it occurs to you to think of the consequences before you act?" She shook her head.

"Boss..."

"Brosca, shut it." Saitada didn't even bother to look at him.
"Lenore, you're on camp detail until I say otherwise."

"Yes, Commander."

"Fix Jerath's shoulder. Wynne shouldn't have to clean up your mess."

"Yes, Commander."

#

"You have a barbed tongue, Morrigan. Tell me, why do you speak to others this way?"

Morrigan smirked. "I owe you no explanation. There is no writing on my forehead that says 'Please, guide me!'"

Wynne shook her head. "You are traveling with these people. It behooves you to be civil."

"You are too transparent, old woman. Do not bring up our companions, when all you wish is for me to be civil to you. I am not one of your Circle apprentices, to hang on your every word. I am not Alistair, who sees in you a surrogate mother." Morrigan's face was contemptuous.

"No, it is obvious you are nothing like Alistair."

"Take your lectures elsewhere. They mean nothing to me."

Saitada sighed. After several days in the deep roads and little chance to avoid each other's company, tempers were starting to flare. Lenore was still sulking, and Brosca and Zevran were hovering over her a bit protectively. She shook her head. Lenore was well into adulthood, she did not need to be coddled like a child. They hadn't gone far when Morrigan and Wynne began to bicker once more.

"You do not approve of me, do you?"

"You have to ask? I didn't realize I was being subtle." Wynne's eyes narrowed at the younger woman.

Morrigan all but cackled. "Ah, the old cat still has her claws, I see. And you also do not approve of my involvement with our stalwart young warden."

"You are dangerous, Morrigan. Dangerous, cunning and thoroughly deceitful. But you are beautiful, and he is young. It's a pity he doesn't know any better."

Morrigan tossed her hair loftily. "Why, Wynne, I do believe that is the first time you have ever offered a compliment. Thank you."

"Only you would take that as a compliment." Wynne shook her head in disapproval.

"Listen, old woman. what happens between myself and him is not your concern. You can approve or not approve as you wish, but this is one thing you cannot influence and mould to

your liking."

"So you say. I do hope that one day soon you will discover that neither is he."

"You mistake my intent, old cat. And you are a fool."

"Am I? Well, let's hope so."

Saitada found herself feeling a bit glad Jerath was up with Brehan, taking point. She couldn't imagine he'd be too happy with the conversation.

It started again as they entered a new tunnel.

"Have you given thought to, perhaps, prolonging your life by forcing another spirit into your service?" Morrigan asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Of course not."

"I would. Of course I am still young, beautiful, and my life is my own - while you are bound to that Circle. Hmm. I wonder why I asked. It would be a silly thing, prolonging your life. A waste."

"Think what you will, Morrigan. When the end comes, I will go gladly to my rest, proud of my achievements. While you... you will see how empty your life was. You will realize that because you never had love for others, you never received love in return. And you will die alone and unmourned." Actual venom filled Wynne's voice.

"You speak of meaningless things. I need no one to mourn me, old woman."

"More's the pity."

This was getting out of hand. "Morrigan, Wynne, that's enough."

"Commander..." Wynne started to protest.

"I said that is enough. If you two cannot be civil, then stay away from each other."

Morrigan lengthened her stride when she saw Jerath waiting for them at entrance to another tunnel. She spoke to him a moment, then kissed him. Wynne shook her head. "Such childish antics."

Saitada sighed.

#

"Do you realize that you have been smiling for hours, now?"

Brehan blinked at Morrigan. "Have I?"

"Since the last time you and that girl shot glances at each other, in fact." Morrigan shrugged. "I cannot imagine what you begin to see in her. I hope at least the dalliance is worthwhile."

Brehan shrugged. "Oh, you have no idea."

"I see." She actually chuckled. "Glad to hear it, then. 'Tis a bit sickening to watch you two, but I imagine it at least takes your mind from our... situation."

He considered a moment. Was the woman actually trying to be... nice? "Well, thank you."

"You and Leliana do seem well suited," Jerath said.

Brehan smiled. "Yeah. Strange, isn't it?" He shook his head. "And Orlesian bard turned chantry priestess, of all things." He glanced at Jerath. "Are you an Andrastian?"

"No."

"I thought most city elves were."

"Most are. I'm not."

"Do you follow the creators, then?" Brehan asked. Jerath shook his head. "So... what do you believe?"

"That the world is what we make it." He glanced back over her shoulder. "So she was a bard. Explains a few things."

"We chased Marjolaine off in Denerim. Hopefully, that's the last of her."

43. Chapter 43

"So, Shale... when you were standing there all that time? Did you... sleep?" Alistair looked at the golem curiously.

"I have no need to sleep. My body does not tire or do-ugh-other flesh-related functions."

"But don't you get bored? Wouldn't you want to dream, at least?"

"I do not dream. This is what it does when it sleeps? It paws its nose and mumbles incoherently."

"Yes, of course. I thought we all-huh..." He stumbled slightly, and then looked back at her. "You watch me?"

"I watch all closely when they are still at night. There is little else to do."

"For... hours and hours?"

"I count the breaths. it helps to overcome the overwhelming urge to crush their faces while they sleep."

"Well. I won't be doing much of that anymore."

The golem fell back, and began engaging Wynne in

conversation. Lenore listened, her face fascinated. After a moment, she joined the conversation.

Saitada felt a bit of relief. Maybe they could get through this without tearing out each other's throats. Then she saw Morrigan heading back. She blinked, taking in the woman's expression. "Trouble?"

"Darkspawn ahead."

"How many?"

Morrigan glanced over her shoulder. Jerath had Brehan's arm over his shoulders as he half-carried the man back to camp. Brehan's face was pale. Leliana immediately rushed forward to help Jerath. Brehan looked up at her. "It's here."

"What's here?"

"The arch demon. In the trenches. It's with the horde. They are on the move."

#

"Atrast Vala, Grey Wardens."

Saitada smiled at Kardol. "That's the warmest greeting I've had since returning."

"Your past means nothing to the Legion of the Dead." He shrugged. "Stone, if I'd had my way, you'd been one of us. What do you want here, warden?"

She sighed. "Believe it or not, I'm working with Prince Bhelen."

"You're working for a fool. We follow the throne, which is empty. Below that is politics beneath Legion notice. That's the benefit of our oath."

"I always did like you, Kardol."

"Suppose that's why you didn't kill me." He chuckled. "What, does he need some weight to swing the vote in the Assembly? I suppose you're sweeping the vents for Paragons."

She shook her head. "That's about it. You have anything useful to add?"

"Warden, you've got your work cut out for you. Paragon Branka is dead, everyone with sense knows it. Past our line, the darkspawn kill everything."

"Why hold back?" Cathiel asked.

"I'd gladly lead an assault through the Dead Trenches, but without an ass in the throne, we have no orders. I won't take fool's gold from a pretender." He shrugged. "You want to go digging blind, you go right ahead."

Saitada glanced back at Brehan, then back to Kardol. "You should know... we sensed the presence of the archdemon. Nearby."

Kardol nodded. "So it is a Blight."

"It is."

He shook his head. "The other kingdoms only care when the darkspawn march in the light. But they are always here, always pushing. You lived here. You know. Blights only take so long because we keep the darkspawn in check. A surge on the surface would reduce the pressure on us." He spat.

"When the time comes, I'll care for a good dwarven reason. Sod the rest."

"It was good to see you, Kardol."

"Good luck, Grey Warden."

#

"Old friend?" Cathiel asked.

"Not exactly." Saitada laughed.

Brosca squinted, then suddenly his eyes widened. "Kardol? Wait, Kardol Havor?" He looked back at where the legionnaires were standing. "Stone."

Leliana blinked. "Oh, this sounds like a story."

"He bloody well tried to kill her!"

Saitada shook her head. "Actually, he tried to kill Trian. It was some years ago. If he's holding the line... Orzammar will stand a while longer."

#

"The bloody doors of Bownammar. I never thought I'd ever see these, you know?"

"Why not?" Cathiel asked.

"Bownammar's been lost to the darkspawn for generations. I'm pretty stupid, I'll give you that, but even I won't fight through these hissing beasts just to see some big doors." He twirled the one end of his mustache. "Why'd you think they built them so big anyway? Over-compensation?" He shrugged. "Anyway, you'd better be ready to crack skulls once we get in there."

Cathiel examined the door. "I'm not sure we are getting in that way."

"Kardol said there is a side passage. We'll go that way," Saitada said.

"There are at least five ogres on the other side of this door," Brehan said. He concentrated. "At least one emissary. Few dozen genlocks."

"You're back with us then?" Cathiel gave him a concerned look.

He nodded. "I was unprepared for..." He sighed. "I'll be fine."

Saitada nodded. "Leliana, probably don't need to tell you, but stay close to him."

Leliana smiled. "I shall."

"Jerath, take point. Brosca, back him."

#

"See those barrels?" Brosca whispered.

"I see them."

"Tripwires. Rigged to explode."

Jerath sighed. "And if you go to disarm them..."

"They've got crossbows."

"Call up the mages?"

"Tunnel is unstable. They start throwing... or for that matter, the barrels go, we're stuck trying to break that door."

The two exchanged a look. Jerath put a hand to his sword. "I'll go high, draw them off, you disarm."

"Junior, you heard what Brehan said about the ogres." Brosca shook his head. "Even you can't take on half a dozen ogres solo."

"I don't need to. I just need to keep them from noticing you."

"You realize if you get dead, Morrigan is going to turn me into a pain-wracked smear on the wall, right?"

"Yes, but I'll be dead, so it won't be my concern."

Brosca nodded. "Right." He readied his dagger. "Go."

Jerath came out of cover and leaped lightly from barrel to barrel. He landed among the darkspawn and slashed out with his blade, cutting down the emissary. He shifted direction almost immediately, tumbling away and heading down the next corridor. The spawn gave chase, and Brosca went to work on the traps.

#

He ran up along a ledge above the carvings on the wall, then dove into a tunnel too small for the ogres to give chase. He heard a sound, and crept towards it. He sensed... something. Similar to what he'd sensed from Lenore's little friend.

Jerath heard it again. It sounded like... chanting. He moved cautiously. The smell that came from the small chamber was horrific. He dropped down. A woman stood, and turned to face him. Her skin was mottled in shades of gray, and her eyes were glazed as she looked at him. "What is this? An elf? Exotic and impossible." She shook her head to move past him. Skeletons, bits of red and rotting flesh still clinging to the bone, were scattered around the room. Dwarven skeletons. "Feeding time brings only kin and clan. I am cruel to myself. You are the dream of strangers' faces and open doors."

His eyes widened, and he looked back at the skeletons. "You've been forced to eat your kin?"

"And others." She circled him slowly. "Fresh, not those who turn. Killed right here. And we're fed. Laryn first. But I am filled. I am..." She looked away, and to his horror picked up a bone and nibbled at it. "All I could do was wish Laryn went first. I wished it upon her so that I would be spared." She tossed the bone aside, and pulled another from a pustule of corruption. She rejected it, tossing it aside as well. "But I had to watch. I had to see the change. How do you endure that? How did Branka endure?"

He looked again at the skeletons. "Are you from Branka's house?"

She rounded on him, and a sob escaped her. "D-do not talk of Branka, of what she did. Ancestors preserve us, forgive me. I was her captain and I didn't stop her." She shoved a hand into his chest, pushing him back a pace. "Her lover, and I could not turn her. Forgive her..." She threw a gobbet of flesh at him, and he only barely managed to dodge it. "But no, she cannot be forgiven. Not for what she did. Not for what she has become."

He hesitated, afraid to ask. Afraid of the answer. "What did she do, Hespith? What did Branka do?"

She paced. "I will not speak of her! Of what she did, of what we have become! I will not turn!" She shoved him again, then lifted her hands and turned desperately from side to side. "I will not become what I have seen! Not Laryn! Not Branka!" She looked at him again, and then turned and fled. He looked back over his shoulder, and then followed.

#

Saitada saw led the party into the tunnel. She saw Brosca disarming a trap. He held up a hand as they approached. "One more," he said.

"Where is Jerath?"

"Playing bait."

"Brosca..."

"Got it, let's go rescue Junior." Brosca drew his weapons and rushed off down the tunnel. The others followed. Alistair and Sten quickly took the lead, their longer legs allowing them to outdistance the others. Leliana and Cathiel began firing their bows as soon as the darkspawn were in sight. Alistair rolled, and then came up behind an ogre. He stabbed backwards, putting his sword through the back of the ogre's knee. He yanked it back as the ogre fell, and then smashed his shield into the ogre, unbalancing it further. It flailed at him, and then he slashed, opening its throat with a spray of black blood.

She saw no sign of Jerath. Brehan yanked the foot out from under another ogre, and Brosca brought his mace down on it with three solid blows. Sten drove a third ogre back into Shale, who simply used her massive fists to smash its head open.

A fourth ogre started to charge the casters, and Saitada moved forward to block it. Oghren went to her side, and they

drove it back. After driving her blade into it, she turned to mark the fifth, and found the archers had dealt with the matter.

Brosca looked around, and then looked around again. "Where's Junior?"

"Brehan?"

Brehan closed his eyes. After a moment, he pointed. "That way. Moving." He opened his eyes again. "There is something else moving along with him. And darkspawn in the area."

Saitada growled, and turned to look at Brosca. "You realize that after I kill him, I'm going to kill you?"

Brosca sighed, and then nodded.

#

He caught up with her near a small shrine. A few genlocks entered. Jerath started to reach for his blade, and she caught his arm. The darkspawn moved past, heading back up the tunnel. Hespith looked up at him. "She became obsessed... That is the word, but it is not strong enough. Blessed Stone, there was nothing left in her but the Anvil." She closed her hand around his wrist, and pulled him with her.

#

They fought their way through a tomb of risen corpses. If she weren't worried sick about their young companion, Cathiel

would actually find the place fascinating. A hall of the ancient dwarves. She glanced at her friends, and then frowned. Wynne looked frantic. Morrigan didn't look concerned at all. Bitch.

Saitada raised an eyebrow at Brehan. Brehan sighed. "I still sense him. I can tell you which direction he's in, but with all the tunnels and corridors, that means little." He frowned. "He moves, then stops. Hiding from them, maybe?"

She rubbed her forehead. "Look around. See if you can find any sign of Branka."

They searched quickly. Oghren shook his head at her. "Not sure she was ever in this section."

Lenore tucked a few books and scrolls away in her pack. "There are two options for travel. A door, and a corridor."

"Brehan?"

Brehan pointed. "He's that way."

"My guess would be the corridor," Lenore said uncertainly.

#

She cowered. "We tried to escape, but they found us. They took us all, turned us..."

He crouched next to her. How had Lenore managed to gain the cooperation of the other one so easily? "Hespith, I have

allies..."

"No!" She grabbed his arm again. He tried to pull free, but her grip was stronger than he would have thought possible. She stood, pulling him with her past another group of genlocks. One looked in his direction, and then turned back to what he was doing. She shook her head. She led him into a room that pulsed with the corruption. Half-dismembered bodies, starting to rot, hung from the ceiling. Foulness filled the air. She looked back at him urgently. "The men, they kill... they're merciful. But the women, they want. They want to touch, to mold, to change until you are filled with them..."

#

The bridge ahead was broken. Alistair flung a rock off the side in frustration. "Not this way."

"There were side corridors," Cathiel said.

"I'm going to kill him," Saitada said. "I'm going to sodding kill him. Then I'm going to shove a spirit down his throat, bring him back, and kill him again." She turned to glare at Brosca.

Brosca sighed. "He was just supposed to lead them away. A quick distraction while I disarmed the traps, so we didn't get buried under rock."

"I know." She sighed. "I know. And..." Her face softened. "Had I been there, I would likely have ordered exactly that."

"Saitada?"

She turned to look at Brehan, and read his face. "You don't sense him anymore?"

"He could just be out of my range. Or there may just be too much stone between..."

She looked around at their faces. "Back the way we came. Towards the Anvil." She held up a hand to forestall the protests. "We could search down here a lifetime, and find nothing. He knows our destination, and it is just as likely he is seeking us. Brehan, keep your senses open."

He nodded.

#

She dragged him through another corridor, her grip like a vise around his wrist. She stopped, and pulled him down next to a pulsing module of corruption. "They took Laryn. They made her eat the others, our friends." She caressed the pulsing node, and then pushed her hand into it. From inside, she took a skull, and held it out to him. "She tore off her husband's face and drank his blood." She went still as a genlock passed, close enough that he could have reached out and touched it.

"Why aren't they attacking you?" He could see more genlocks moving around them.

"Need me. Feed me."

"Why aren't they attacking me?" He cast out with his senses, trying to get an idea of just how many he'd have to fight through if they suddenly started paying attention to him.

She touched his cheek, and he nearly shuddered at the feel of the corruption coating her fingers. "Young. Fresh." Her eyes narrowed. "Tainted."

"I am a Grey Warden." He was in the middle of an enemy army. A chill ran down his spine. If he wasn't beyond the range of Brehan's senses... If they thought he needed rescue... Please, Saitada, don't let them do anything stupid.

"They need me. Feed me."

He blinked, and then looked back at the genlocks. "Feed you. They think I'm your lunch."

"Don't run. Hunt you, if you run. Hunt you and bring you back to me, piece by piece. Meat."

"Where are you taking me?"

She pulled him through the darkspawn without answering.

#

The next tunnel they tried took them to a caved in area. Brosca started to backtrack before Saitada could say anything, and went to a different tunnel. Oghren suddenly blinked. "There. Look. Wall chips. Branka was here."

"A good sign," Saitada said.

A few minutes later, Brosca knelt to disable a trap. He smiled. "Dwarven work. Not darkspawn."

"Brehan, any sign?"

"Genlocks all over the other tunnels, but I think this way is clear. And no."

#

"First day, they come and catch everyone. Second day, they beat us, and eat some for meat. Third day, the men are all gnawed on again." She recited the bitter poem as she pulled him deeper into the tunnels. This time, she went around the larger group of darkspawn. "Fourth day, we wait and fear for our fate. Fifth day, they return and it's another girl's turn. Sixth day, her screams we hear in our dreams."

"Hespith, where are we going?"

She turned back to him and put a hand over his mouth. Her glazed eyes met his. "Seventh day, she grew as in her mouth they spew." She removed her hand, and shook her head at him. Her voice dropped until it was almost just a hiss. "Eighth day, we hated as she is violated."

He felt a chill run down his spine. And then, it was almost like the rage was with him again. This was the fate to which Bhelen had been willing to condemn Saitada. Hespith must

have seen the look in his eye. She nodded, and pointed ahead. "Ninth day, she grins..." She leaned forward until she was almost whispering in his ear. "And devours her kin." She drew back, then pulled him forward again. "Now she does feast, as she's become the beast."

#

"Darkspawn ahead." Brehan narrowed his eyes. "Genlocks. A lot of them. Maybe three hundred. At least five alphas and a half dozen emissaries. Two ogres."

"Those odds are a bit longer than I'd like," Saitada said. "Let's see if we can't find a way around."

A side passage took them through a tomb. One wall was collapsed to a section of natural tunnel. Brosca went first, keeping an eye out for traps.

They had not gone far when Brehan stopped. He closed his eyes, and turned a slow circle. "Brehan?" Saitada started to ask.

"Shhh..." He seemed to sniff the air. Then he opened his eyes. "Jerath passed this way. Not long ago. Maybe an hour."

"How do you know?"

"I..." He shook his head. "I just do."

"Brehan..."

"Duncan told me of a warden once, who could track by what he called the scent of another warden's passing," Alistair said, staring at Brehan. "Maybe..."

Saitada raised an eyebrow at him. "Is that what you are doing?"

"I don't know. I've never actually tried this hard to find one of you before," he replied."

Saitada nodded. "Take the lead."

#

They came to a cavern. She led him up an incline. "And while she ate, she grew. She swelled and turned gray and she smelled like them. They remade her in their image. Then she made more of them."

She released his wrist. He felt a tingle as circulation began to return to his nearly numb fingers. She held up a hand, and pointed. "Broodmother..."

He looked at her, then walked to the ledge and looked. The creature below resembled something between a maggot and a spider and... He turned back to Hespith. "That's Layrn?"

"That's where they come from. That's why they hate us... that's why they need us." She touched his arm, her face urgent. "That's why they take us... that's why they feed us."

He nodded. "Broodmother."

She looked away. "But the true abomination... is not that it occurred, but that it was allowed. Branka... my love..." She shook her head. "The Stone has punished me, dream-friend. I am dying of something worse than death. Betrayal."

He nodded, and drew his sword.

She smiled.

#

Brehan's face broke into a wide smile. "He's ahead. He's not moving, but I can sense him."

"Good," Saitada said. "I'm going to have a brief chat with him."

"I'm going to drag him all the way back to the surface by an ear," Wynne said. Saitada glanced back at the other woman. Relief seemed to war with anger on Wynne's face.

They'd walked about a hundred feet more when Brehan stopped short. He shook his head. Then shook it again. Saitada frowned as he began to mutter something in Elvish. "Brehan?"

"I... I don't know what that is, Saitada, but... Mythal guide me, it's like..."

Leliana put an arm around his shoulder. "Pull it back, vhenan."

He nodded, and then swallowed. He turned to look at Saitada.

"I think he found trouble."

"Well, then, let's go rescue him so we can kill him."

#

He was sitting next to a doorway when they found him, his knees level with his chest, and his blood coated sword resting atop them. His eyes were closed. Gore was smeared across his face, and coated his pants nearly to his knees.

"Jerath, where the hell have you..." Saitada broke off when he opened his eyes. They were cold and angry.

He stood, slowly, his blade in hand. "It is through there. The Anvil lies just behind it."

Saitada blinked. The bruises around his arm stood out starkly against his skin, looking almost like a series of overlapping handprints. "Are you all right?"

He looked past her to Oghren. "I'm sorry," he said.

Oghren shook his head. "Branka is dead?"

"She's alive." He looked down at the sword. "I'm going to kill her." He started for the door.

"Jerath, wait..." Saitada said.

"Layrn has waited too long already."

#

Cathiel felt bile rising in the back of her throat when she saw the creature. "Maker's breath..." She glanced at Jerath. "That's the thing holding Layrn?"

It was Saitada's voice that answered, quiet and bleak. "That... is Layrn."

"Broodmother..." Alistair's voice was little more than a whisper.

As they approached, tentacles suddenly rose out of the corruption surrounding the thing. It shrieked, an unholy, ravenous sound.

"Incoming," Brehan yelled as he slashed at a tentacle trying to grasp Wynne.

Lenore turned and put up a wall of fire in front of one of the tunnels. A dozen genlocks streamed out of another. Oghren, Brehan, and Sten turned back to meet them.

Shale let out a howl, and slammed her fist into one of the rising tentacles. Saitada slashed at another. Alistair attempted to charge past them, slashing across the stomach of the creature. It grabbed him by the throat, lifting him off the ground and spewing corruption into his face.

"Alistair!" Cathiel yelled. She tried to bring her bow to bear, but tentacles struck at her. Jerath leaped from a pillar to

come down on the back of the thing, bringing his axe down into its shoulder. It dropped Alistair, who fell motionless to the ground, and flailed about trying to get a hold of the elf. More genlocks entered, and Morrigan used her magic to hold several in place for Brehan to cut down with his axe.

Shale stood over Alistair, keeping the tentacles from striking at the unconscious man. Jerath drove his sword through the back of the broodmother's neck. It jerked, then one of its hands closed around Jerath's ankle. It yanked him off his foot, then used him as a weapon to knock Shale off hers. One by one the tentacles went slack as the thing flailed about a last time, then went still.

"Lenore, Wynne!" Saitada called out as she joined the others holding back the genlocks.

Lenore rushed to Alistair, and Wynne to Jerath. Cathiel forced herself to trust the mage's skills, and turned her arrows to the oncoming spawn.

#

"How are they?" Saitada asked, going to where the mages were tending to the wounded men.

Lenore looked up at her. "If he hadn't upgraded his armor in Orzammar, he'd be dead. The guard is all that kept the thing from crushing his throat. His breathing is steady now, but he's got a broken leg from where she dropped him, and he's coated in... I'm just going to call it ew."

"And Jerath?"

"As well as can be expected from someone who recently struck a golem with considerable force," Wynne replied.

"Several broken ribs, a leg broken in two places, and I believe his armor has been damaged beyond repair. Fortunately, his skull is particularly thick." She glanced up.

Saitada nodded. "How about you, Shale?"

"I have an elf-shaped dent in my left side. It is most unbecoming.'

She shook her head and gave a small laugh. "Brehan, any more incoming?"

"Nothing more than a few stragglers within the range of my senses."

She nodded. "Let's move on, see if we can find a place that isn't coated in..." Her eyes went to Lenore. "...Ew, and regroup."

Sten went to pick up Alistair, and Lenore blocked him. He raised an eyebrow at her. "You aren't a warden, Sten, and he's coated in that stuff. Brehan, can you get Jerath?" She waited for him to nod. "Shale, mind carrying Alistair?" Before the golem could object, Lenore continued on. "I promise we will find you some more gems and get you a good polish later."

"Very well. I will carry it."

44. Chapter 44

"You are trying to decide if I'm healed up enough for you to yell at me."

Saitada nodded at Jerath. "Are you?"

"I went high, out of the ogre's reach. My plan was to hide and wait for you. Then I heard Hespith."

"Who is Hespith?"

"Branka's former captain." He held out his wrist. The bruising had faded a bit from the healing, but it was still visible. "She was in the process of being turned into one of those things. A fair bit stronger than Sten, by my estimate. She dragged me to Layrn." He sighed. "Right through the middle of a darkspawn encampment."

"How?"

"As long as she had a hold of me, they ignored me. House Branka is dead, Saitada." He shook his head. "What corpses the spawn didn't eat, they fed to Layrn. And Hespith."

"Stone..."

"Hespith said that Branka allowed it; she was so obsessed by

the Anvil."

Saitada nodded. "You alright?"

Annoyance briefly settled over his features. "Recently, you sent me to retake a fort from demons."

She sighed. "I didn't send you alone, and we hadn't recently sensed an archdemon." She sighed. "You're fifteen."

"Sixteen."

She blinked. "You didn't say anything."

"Didn't seem important. I'm fine. Hope you didn't yell at Brosca."

"Just glared at him a bit." She glanced up to where Morrigan was watching. "You scared the hell out of us. So, here is what I'm going to do." She smiled. "I'm going to leave you to Morrigan's mercy." She smiled at the look he gave her, and went to go check on Alistair.

#

Morrigan sat next to him. "Your companions seem to think that you are in great danger when left to your own devices."

He shrugged. "Well, I did find trouble."

"And the only reason you were harmed by it is you had to step in to save that fool Alistair." She shrugged. "I have something

for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have a gift for you." She glanced at him. "'Tis a ring. Now, before you get any foolish notions, let me explain. Flemeth once gave me a ring because it allowed her to find me no matter where I went, in case I was ever captured by hunters. I disabled its power as soon as we left the Wilds. Recently, however, I thought to change it. Now, I will be able to find whoever wears it instead."

He put the band around his finger. "It's a sweet gift."

She smiled before she caught herself. "'Tis not given out of sentimentality. I believe you are too important to risk. If you were captured, this ring would allow the rest of us to find you quickly."

"Does it do anything else?" Something about its design was oddly soothing to his eye. It felt warm, around his finger.

"Flemeth used to say that 'twas a link between us, one that I presumed worked both ways. I never tested it, but I doubt she would have lied over such a thing. So it would mean I am linked to you as much as you to I."

He gazed up at her. "So I could find you, if need be?"

Her face looked oddly touched by the question, but her voice was uncertain. "I... do not know. As I said, I never tested it."

Perhaps."

"So you are giving it to me purely out of practicality?" He asked the question mostly to watch her squirm. She was beautiful when she stammered.

"I... have no desire to see us part company so soon. Not unless we wish to, that is." She gave him a defensive look. "Do not read more into it than is there. You have supplied me with equipment, certainly this is not so very different, is it?"

"Thank you for the gift." He wondered if she knew she fiddled with one of the straps on her skirt when she tried to hide from him.

"You... are welcome. Perhaps it will be useful some day."

#

Lenore shook her head in amusement. Jerath was more annoyed that nobody had recovered his sword from the dead broodmother than he was about the broodmother using him as a weapon against Shale. Fortunately, he'd been carrying a spare. His spare armor, however, was lighter than the splint mail he'd been wearing earlier. Watching Wynne alternate between hovering over Jerath and fussing over Alistair would have been funnier if she didn't feel like doing the exact same thing.

They had just stepped from a tunnel into a cavern when suddenly a barrier rose behind them.

"What was that?" Oghren asked.

A woman's deep voice came from the other side of the barrier. "Let me be blunt with you. After all this time, my tolerance for social graces is fairly limited. That doesn't bother you, I hope."

"Shave my back and call me an elf! Branka? By the Stone, I barely recognized you!" Oghren spread his hands and smiled.

Lenore saw Jerath's eyes go cold, and he put a hand to his sword. She really hoped Oghren didn't try to get in his way.

Branka's voice sounded almost bored. "Oghren. It figures you'd find your way here. Hopefully, you can find your way back more easily. And how shall I address you? Hired swords of the latest lordling to come looking for me? Or just the only ones that didn't mind Oghren's ale-breath?"

Oghren shook his head. "Be respectful, woman! You're talking to Grey Wardens!"

"Ah, so important errand boys, then. I suppose something serious has happened. Is Endrin dead? That seems most likely. He was on the old and wheezy side."

It was Saitada's turn to go cold. "My father is dead. They Assembly is deadlocked.

"Saitada? You are... seeking my support? You wish to succeed Endrin and become a ruling queen?" Lenore blinked,

and wondered for a moment if that actually would work. "I don't care if the Assembly puts a drunken monkey on the throne." Her voice rose as she orated. "Because our protector, our great invention, the thing that once made our armies the envy of the world, is lost to the very darkspawn it should be fighting. The Anvil of the Void. The means by which the ancients forged their army of golems and held off the first archdemon ever to rise. It's here. So close I can taste it."

"But of course there is a catch." Lenore rolled her eyes.

Frustration filled the answer. "The Anvil lies on the other side of a gauntlet of traps designed by Caridin himself. My people and I have given body and soul to unlocking its secrets. This is what's important. This has lasting meaning. If I succeed, the dwarven people benefit. Kings, politics... all that is transitory. I've given up everything and would sacrifice anything to get the Anvil of the Void."

"Does that include Hespith and the others of your house?" Jerath's voice was calm and steady.

There was silence for a moment. "Enough questions!" Branka shot back, her voice angry. "If you wish me to get involved with this imbecilic election, I must first have the Anvil." Her voice grew cold. "There is only one way out, Warden. Forward. Through Caridin's maze and out to where the Anvil waits."

Oghren shook his head. "What has this place done to you?! I remember marrying a girl you could talk to for one minute and

see her brilliance."

"I am your Paragon."

The tunnel at the other side of the chamber began to spew darkspawn. Lenore readied her staff, then her eyes widened. "Morrigan, Wynne, the veins. Lyrium." She saw Morrigan change the spell she was in the process of casting as the warriors charged in, weapons drawn.

From her position, she could hear Branka speaking, musing aloud to herself. "I needed people to test Caradin's traps. There is no way to break through except by trial and error. I sent them in... They were all mine, pledged to be my house, and they didn't want to help. They tried to leave me, even my Hespith... But even she couldn't understand that when you reach for greatness, there are sacrifices. As many sacrifices as are needed."

Lenore focused her spell on powering the weapons of her companions. She didn't dare unleash a fireball with lyrium this close to the surface. She'd bring the entire chamber down. Next to her, Morrigan focused her own magic on sending darts of energy at individual darkspawn, firing the spells nearly as fast as Cathiel fired arrows. Wynne focused on their allies, revitalizing their energy stores as they kept up against the waves of darkspawn.

"She shouldn't have gone. She was pledged to me. She swore she'd do whatever it took to find the Anvil. There was no other choice. Most of them were dying of the taint already, but

some... some of the women were... transforming." The voice almost became gleeful. "I knew what they would become. There would be an endless supply, fresh darkspawn to test the traps. They could still serve me, let me find the Anvil. It was the only way..."

Her blood ran cold.

An ogre led the last wave of darkspawn. Zevran and Brosca hit it together, movements perfectly matched. Brosca went between its legs, sending his knife into one knee as he smashed his mace into the other. Behind him, Zevran leaped, burying his blades in the thing's chest and sending it tumbling backwards. Its hands started to come up, and Zevran drove Ruck's sword into its brain.

"You have no idea how they carried on, holding my hand and begging to die. They had pledged me their loyalty! They had no right to fight me." The voice grew cold. "The way your order is renowned for its wits as well as its brawn. Perhaps you'll do better than my poor clansmen. There's something about this place... It makes people despair."

If Jerath wanted to kill this bitch, he was going to have to get in line.

#

They entered a room, and immediately began coughing. Saitada glanced back at Lenore. "Lenore, remember what I said about not activating things?"

"Yes?"

"Ignore that. Figure this place out."

One of the golems started to come at them. Shale moved to block it, preventing it from bringing its fists down on Brehan. No sooner had Sten's sword brought it down than another came to life. Oghren tried to move in, but barely managed to dodge the blow as he started coughing from the gas. Jerath barely managed to pull the dwarf out of the way of the thing's fists

Then the gas began to vanish. Saitada drew a deep breath. "Got it!" Lenore yelled. Saitada laughed to herself. The mage sent a spell that knocked the next golem to the ground. Oghren and Brehan brought their axes down on it simultaneously. Alistair and Saitada moved in as the last one was hit by the same spell delivered by Morrigan.

Shale looked around. Lenore smiled at her. "These ones were probably malfunctioning. You are way mightier."

#

This time they let the mages cast before moving in. With Morrigan and Lenore both working their magic, they cleared the room methodically. Brosca and Zevran cleared the traps as the stronger fighters dealt with the golems.

In the last room, Saitada sighed, and looked at Lenore again. "Well?"

She examined the apparatus. "I think... okay... when I activate this, it is going to summon things. We need to kill those things, then..." She bent, examining the pedestals. "Morrigan, look at this. Kill the spirit, and then activate the pedestal?"

Morrigan nodded. "That should disrupt the energy. Enough will break the contraption."

"Look at these resonance harmonics. You know, we could use something like this to enhance a staff's ability to manifest electricity."

"Or increase the inherent connection between the staff and the fade to improve the range of the spirit school altogether."

"I bet if we used something like this combined with the anti-magic wards like at the tower we could..." the two continued back and forth.

"Who besides me thinks those two working together may just be the scariest thing we've encountered thus far?" Brehan asked.

Brosca raised his hand, followed a moment later by Sten, Alistair, Cathiel, and Jerath. Saitada and Wynne exchanged a look, and raised their hands as well.

"I think it's sexy," Zevran said.

"Lenore?"

"Yes, Saitada?"

"Just break the damn thing already."

"Oh, right."

#

They entered a chamber where multiple golems stood. As they grew closer, the largest of the golems stirred, and moved towards them. Saitada held up a hand as her companions went for their weapons.

"My name is Caridin. Once, longer ago than I care to think, I was a Paragon to the dwarves of Orzammar."

Shale moved towards him, slowly. "Caridin? The Paragon smith? Alive?"

"Ah, there is a voice I recognize. Shayle of the House of Cadash, step forward."

Lenore watched their golem ally walk towards the larger golem, its stride almost reverent. Shale stopped at the front of the group. "You... know my name? Is it you that forged me, then? Is it you that gave me my name?"

"Have you forgotten, then?" The sound of the golem's sigh was like a roll of thunder. "It has been so long. I made you into the golem you are now, Shayle, but before that you were a dwarf... just as I was. The finest warrior to serve King Valtor, and the only woman to volunteer."

She couldn't help but think that if her blood grew any colder,

ice would start to form on her skin. Shale had been a dwarf once. The implications were... Maker... Lenore exchanged a look with Wynne, and saw her own horror reflected in the older woman's eyes.

"The only... woman? A dwarf?" Any other time, Lenore would have been amused by the shock in the golem's voice.

"I laid you on the Anvil of the Void, here in this very room, and put you into the form you now possess."

"The Anvil of the Void..." Shale said. "That is what we seek."

Sorrow filled Caridin's voice, and though Lenore knew it was likely just fancy, she thought it filled his face as well. "If you seek the Anvil, then you must care about my story, or be doomed to relive it."

Stark awe filled Saitada's face. "You made the Anvil, I take it?" Lenore blinked when she noted similar expressions on the faces of Brosca and Oghren. It occurred to her that to them, this was something like meeting Enchanter Adralla, or perhaps Archon Hessarian.

"Though I made many things in my time, I rose to fame and earned my status based on a single item: the Anvil of the Void." Pride warred with sorrow in his voice. "It allowed me to forge a man of steel or stone, as flexible and clever as any soldier. As an army, they were invincible. But I told no one the cost." Regret won. "No mere smith, however skilled, has the power to create life. To make my golems live, I had to take

their lives from elsewhere."

She heard her own voice. "Sounds like blood magic. A dangerous road."

Caridin looked towards her. "The darkspawn were pressing in. Originally I only took volunteers, the bravest of souls willing to trade their very lives for the chance to defend their homeland." His voice grew resonant with anger. "But King Valtor became greedy. He began to force men... casteless and criminals... his political enemies... all of them were to be given to the anvil." He looked down, and she thought she saw sorrow on what served as his features. "It took feeling the hammer's blow myself to realize the height of my crimes."

Saitada shook her head. "So you sealed it away? Orzammar could use it!" Lenore blinked, and gave her a horrified look.

"No! I entombed myself here to find a way to destroy the Anvil! It must not be used again!"

The voice of Branka came from behind them. She waved a metal rod as she spoke. "No! The Anvil is mine! No one will take it from me!" Lenore looked at Saitada, waiting for the signal to attack. She saw Jerath do the same, blade half drawn.

"Shale... you fought to destroy the Anvil once! Do not allow it to fall into unthinking hands again!"

Shale shook her head slowly. "You speak of things I do not

remember. You say we fought... did you use our control rods to command us to do so?"

"I destroyed the rods! Perhaps my apprentices eventually learned to replace the rods, I do not know, but if so, then all they need is the Anvil to make all the slaves they need!" Caridin looked at them. "You! Please... help me destroy the Anvil! Do not let it enslave more souls than it already has!"

Saitada slowly shook her head. She glanced at Jerath, then back at Caridin. "You were a Paragon. I'll help if you support a new king."

Branka's face was furious. "Don't listen! He's been trapped here for a thousand years, stewing in his own madness. Help me claim the Anvil, and you will have an army like you've never seen!"

Oghren growled in frustration. "Branka, you mad, bleeding nug-tail. Does this thing mean so much to you that you can't even see what you've lost to get it?"

Lost? She'd thrown it all away. Lenore wished she didn't see temptation on Saitada's face.

Branka gestured at him with the rod. "Look around. Is this what our empire should look like? A crumbling tunnel filled with darkspawn spume? The Anvil will let us take back our glory!"

Lenore found her voice again. "The Anvil enslaves living souls! It must be destroyed."

Morrigan shook her head. "Have you no desire to discover this anvil's potential? It is a marvel, a tool of creation!"

Wynne's voice was appalled. "Even the best of tools may be misused. This is a thing of blood magic, of destruction!"

"Sometimes creation involves the destruction of one thing to make way for another. 'Tis a law of nature that death is the parent to life."

Lenore stared as Zevran nodded. "It just seems a waste to destroy the Anvil, given what it could do."

"And how would you like to become a golem?" Jerath asked, his voice calm, quiet, and all the more threatening for it.

"You would not dare!" Morrigan said, staring at him.

He met her eyes, and smiled. Lenore found herself wanting a place to hide. "How do you know?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at her.

Morrigan took a step backwards. "I would rather not find out. Fine, destroy it if it pleases you."

Jerath turned his eyes to Zevran. The assassin immediately held up his hands. "All right, all right. Perhaps destroying it is a good idea."

"Thank you, stranger," Caridin said. Your compassion shames me."

Branka held up the rod. "Bah! You are not the only master smith here, Caridin! Golems, obey me! Attack!"

"A control rod! But... my friend, you must help me! I cannot stop her alone!"

Jerath drew his blade. Lenore sent a stone fist into the face of the golem guarding Branka. A heartbeat later, the rest of their companions joined the fray.

#

Yanking the control rod out of her hand and using it to brain her had been one thing, Cathiel mused to herself. Kicking her over the side into the lava might have been something approaching overkill. She made a mental note never to piss Jerath off.

With the control rod broken, the few surviving golems stopped attacking. Caridin touched one of the fallen ones. She heard Brehan say something to him, and the golem looked at the dalish man for a moment before nodding. Caridin rose, and walked towards the rest of them. "Another life lost because of my invention. I wish no mention of it had made it into history."

"Yeah, you ain't kidding," Oghren said. "Stupid woman! Always knew the Anvil would kill her." He didn't look at Jerath.

"How is the woman was not able to disable me as she did you, Caridin?" Shale asked.

"I do not know. Have you been altered?"

"I once had a pathetic little mage of a master. He... did something to me. Experimented on me. And then I killed him and it rendered me paralyzed." Cathiel saw Alistair take a small step away from the golem as she spoke.

"Hmm... Perhaps he was bringing forth old memories? And caused you to remember the time when... you fought at my side. The paralysis you speak of always resulted when the master perished. As for your free will... you were always a strong woman, Shayle. I am pleased to see you remained such."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you."

Caridin shook his head, and gave another rumbling sigh. "Do not thank me. All of this... this is my doing, my legacy." He looked at them. "But at least it ends here. I thank you for standing with me, stranger. The Anvil waits there for you to shatter it."

Morrigan glared. "Yes, excellent idea. Just destroy it now, after all this." A look from Jerath caused her to go silent.

Wynne gave Caridin a small bow. "It was good to meet you, Paragon. I intend to ensure that your warnings about the golems are heard by the Circle of Magi."

"Is there any boon I can grant you for your aid?" Caridin's gaze went to Jerath. "A final favor before I am freed from my

burden?" Jerath jerked his head at Saitada, and Caridin turned to look at her.

Saitada sighed. "Oghren? You lost Branka to this. What do you want?"

"Huh." Oghren twirled one end of his mustache. "Don't suppose you can bring Branka back? Maybe make her a golem, like you?" Cathiel glanced at the ledge Jerath had kicked the dwarven over. She was pretty sure the answer was going to be no.

"I would not do such a thing to her even if I could," Caridin replied.

Oghren sighed. "Somehow I didn't think so. Then I don't want anything that would remind me of... this. Best it's just done. There..." He glanced at Saitada. "Is still the matter of the election. I mean... we still need a Paragon to get the Assembly's support, right?"

"For the aid you've given me, I shall put hammer to steel one last time, and give you a crown for the king of your choice."

#

"What did you say to him?" Leliana asked Brehan.

"That I will sing for them, when we return to the surface." He put an arm around her as they watched the golem work the anvil. "I want very much to be out of these caves."

"What did it feel like?" When he gave her a confused look, she clarified. "The archdemon."

He considered a moment. "Imagine the most beautiful voice you've ever heard, backed by instruments of the finest make played by the most skillful hands. A song written and perfected by a master composer. Every note performed flawlessly, filled with vibrant emotion. Every word urging you to exalt in the most horrific acts of depravity you can imagine." He shook his head. "I can still hear it, way in the back of my mind. Like a sheen of oil weighing down every other song I know."

"You'll feel better when we get you some daylight."

"Yes." He very much hoped she were right. He didn't want to think about how he'd almost understood the words of the song. Almost followed.

#

"You would not have let him turn me into one of those, yes?" Zevran asked Brosca.

Brosca glanced at him. "Well, I'd have certainly tried to stop him."

"It's monstrous," Lenore said. "It's... wrong. No, I wouldn't have let him. I wouldn't let anyone feel that hammer."

Brosca glanced up at Lenore, and then put his arm around her

waist. "Got to you, did it?"

"It and that insane woman and... Layrn was a member of her house, and she..." Lenore's voice went hard. She glanced at where Jerath stood. "You were kinder to her than I would have been."

"I have some notion of what you are like when you get sufficiently riled up," he said. Then he gave her a surprisingly warm smile. "You're a good person, Lenore."

"So are you."

"No. I am not." He touched the hilt of his blade. "If we keep the Anvil, I'll use it." He met her eyes. "That's why it must be destroyed."

She looked towards where Caridin was finishing his work. Then she looked back to Jerath. "I'll see it gets done."

He nodded to her. She returned the nod, and walked to go speak to Alistair.

#

Caridin offered Saitada the completed crown. "There. It is done. Give it to whom you will. I do not wish to hear their names, nor anything more of them. I have already lived far beyond my time. I have no place here."

Saitada took the crown from him. "I will destroy the Anvil, as agreed."

"You have my eternal thanks, stranger. Atrast nal tunsha... may you always find your way in the dark."

She watched as Alistair picked up a hammer and ascended the steps. For a moment, he actually did look like a king, and she found herself smiling. He raised the hammer, and brought it down. The Anvil shattered beneath the blow. He threw the hammer down, and rejoined them. "It is done."

"Good man," Saitada said. She glanced back at the others. Lenore was over by some sort of stone carving, instructing Brosca and Zevran to take rubbings of whatever it was, under the watchful eye of Shale. She sighed. "Let's go back. Believe it or not, I find myself actually missing Ferelden."

#

Lenore dragged Zevran and Brosca with her to check on Ruck. She found him curled on his makeshift pallet, the little vial she'd given him clutched tightly in his hand. They piled stones to make him a cairn, and then rejoined the others.

45. Chapter 45

The trip back was easier, now that they knew the way. Saitada tried not to think about what the tunnels being empty of darkspawn meant for the surface.

At the gate of Orzammar, the guards stared with disbelief as they passed. She led them, dented and blood-stained, straight to the Diamond Quarter, and into the Assembly. The guard on the door took one look at her, and got out of their way.

The steward, Bandelor, was trying to call for order. "Lords of the Assembly, I call for order! This argument gets us nowhere!"

Bhelen's voice was belligerent. "Then why these delaying tactics? I call for a vote right now. My father has one living child to assume the Aeducan throne. Who would deny him that?" She wanted to punch that smug look right off his face.

Harrowmont's voice was angry as he glared at Bhelen. "Your father made me swear on his deathbed you would not succeed him."

The assembly began to stir again as their entrance was noted. Saitada strode to the steward's side as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Bhelen gave her a confident look. "Well, Warden? What news do you bring?"

She smiled at him, and saw his confident look falter. Then she unwrapped the crown and held it for all to see. "I bear a crown from Paragon Caridin, the last creation of the Anvil of the Void." She handed the crown to Bandelor.

He examined it, and then his eyes went wide with awe. "This crown is of Paragon make, and bears House Ortan's ancient seal. Tell us, Warden: whom did Caridin choose?"

"He left the choice to me." Her voice rang out over a hall stunned into silence.

Bandelor swallowed, then spoke in a commanding tone. "We've argued in these chambers for too long. The will of the Paragon is that the Grey Wardens decide."

She let the silence linger a moment more, let it become almost painful. Made sure they would remember. "I grant the crown to Bhelen." And with that, she humbled him with a crown.

"I... you leave me speechless. After all..." His face actually looked grateful. "I am honored that you did what is right for your house."

She smiled. Her house. Aeducan.

#

There were fewer guards this time. Rica was there, her face shining. Bhelen glanced at Saitada, then swallowed and addressed Brosca. "Kevan, now I can embrace you as a brother. And you, Saitada, you have truly surprised me, Sister. You have earned the right to rejoin House Aeducan. Without your aid, I would not have taken this throne so smoothly or so soon."

"You will be a stronger king than Harrowmont." It was best he not view sentiment in her reasoning.

"His name need not pass your lips again. My generals are already preparing for a mission to the surface. When you have need of us, you shall have every able-bodied dwarf in Orzammar. Since you did more than I expected, I offer a personal reward as well. You may recognize this. Trian used it to crack skulls when he was showing off for Father. I'm sure he'd want you to have it. Now, I have much to do. If there is nothing else..."

"I'll take that as a 'thank you'"

"As it was meant. Now, I must address my other petitioners." He hesitated. "Come back and visit sometime."

#

Cathiel glanced over at Saitada. "Your little brother is a gigantic ass."

Saitada sighed. "Next to Trian, Bhelen was a relatively small

ass. It is only with Trian gone that Bhelen can truly show his ass." She sighed, and rubbed her forehead. "And I have been around you Fereldans entirely too long."

Sten shifted his sword. "I can relate."

Cathiel rolled her eyes at the Qunari. "Still, nice... er...hammer."

Saitada glanced at the maul she still carried on one shoulder. She tested its weight, and then offered it to Brehan. "Silverite and dragonbone. Better than the one you've got currently."

Brehan started. "Are you sure? I mean... It was your brother's?"

"It was meant to crack darkspawn skulls." Saitada shrugged. "You will crack darkspawn skulls with it. To all things a purpose."

Brehan took the maul, giving it an admiring heft. "And what would your brother have said, to see his maul in the hands of a Dalish?"

"If he weren't dead, this would have killed him." Saitada smiled at the maul. "Stone take you, Trian, you miserable bastard. Rest in peace."

Morrigan cocked her head to one side. "You make me grateful I have no siblings."

#

Saitada glanced back towards the assembly, and sighed. "I'll catch up with you."

Jerath frowned. "Are you sure that is wise?"

Saitada gave a half-smile. "No, but it is necessary."

Sten glanced back at the assembly, then at Saitada. "I will accompany you."

Saitada nodded, and then turned towards Cathiel. "Head over to Tapsters. Get some warm food in you. Let Brosca order the drinks."

Cathiel grinned. "Understood."

Sten followed Saitada. "You are going to see Harrowmont."

Saitada nodded. "Bhelen is the better king. Harrowmont, the better man."

"Do you intend to conscript Harrowmont?"

"If that is his wish." She sighed. She knew Bhelen would make getting rid of Harrowmont one of his first actions. She could even see his reasoning, stupid as it was. "Or just knock out the guard so he can make a run for it."

"Harrowmont could have fought in the assembly. He made a poor choice for himself."

Saitada nodded. "That is why Bhelen is king. Orzammar

needs someone who can make a stand. Harrowmont couldn't. Not for me, before my exile. Not for himself, today."

"Then why are you doing this?" His face held genuine confusion.

"He failed. He didn't have it in him." She sighed. "But out of love and duty to my father, he tried. This isn't about me, Sten. Or about Orzammar. Or about Bhelen. This is about my father."

"I see... but I do not understand."

She chuckled. "That makes two of us, I suppose."

#

Saitada nodded. "I'm sorry, Lord Harrowmont."

"As am I, child. Your father missed you sorely in his final days. I am glad you found a new place among the Grey Wardens.

She didn't want to know. But she had to. "How did my father die?"

He sighed. "Of a broken heart, in my view. Some say Bhelen poisoned him, but I never left Endrin's side, and I don't see how. Bhelen did kill him, but only by what he did to you."

There was that, at least. Tiny consolation though it may have been. "Is it true my father wished you to be his heir?"

"He knew what a poor king Bhelen would make. He saw it sooner than the rest of us. One of his last requests was that I carry out his wishes as Orzammar's next king. It was the greatest honor of my life. Saitada, you know what your brother is. Why?"

"Because I know what my brother is. Cunning. Strong. Ruthless. And willing to be a force of change. Because whatever else my brother is, he is right. Orzammar must change if it is to survive. Because Orzammar must find a place for everyone. And because... he is my brother."

Harrowmont sighed. "That part, at least, I understand. With all you forgave Trian... I shouldn't be surprised you'd forgive Bhelen."

She shook her head. "I haven't forgiven Bhelen. I never will. But that changes nothing. Lord Harrowmont... say the word, and I will use the rite of conscription. You do not have to die here."

Harrowmont shook his head. "The king has spoken. All I can do is die with dignity."

"May the stone accept you when you fall, Lord Harrowmont."

#

Cathiel rolled her eyes fondly as she watched Brehen coming up with elvish translations for all of Brosca's curses. Alistair was actually making notes. Brosca shook his head. "Ya mean

to tell me after thousands of years of civilization, your people never came up with a word for asschaps?"

"I'm not entirely certain what asschaps are..." Brehan held up a hand to forestall them. "Nor do I wish to be."

Leliana giggled, and provided them with a suitable word in Orlesian.

At another table, Lenore was carefully fitting Shale with blue-tinged crystals, much to the golem's evident delight. "I think these may also serve to make you somewhat more dexterous. Not that I think you should go dwarf juggling or anything."

"What about elves? Can I juggle those?"

"Ours have lots of pointy bits. Okay, what about these? Red or green?"

"Which do you think better complements the blue?"

"The red is certainly more dramatic, and where the two overlap it will create a nice band of royal purple. And the red seems to correspond with fire. I think it will provide you with considerable resistance, so I don't accidentally singe you again."

"What does the elder mage think?" Shale asked Wynne.

"Shale, why do you refer to me as the 'elder mage?'"

"Clearly because it is purple. And a hyena."

Wynne gave a long suffering sigh. "I have a name. We all do. Even though Morrigan is a 'swamp witch', as you call her, maybe she'd prefer being referred to by her name."

"I have no doubt that is so."

"Then you simply wish to be perverse? Surely you are better than that."

"I have found that I am allowed precious few amusements. Since so many prefer to call me 'golem,' I enjoy referring to them in a similar fashion."

"Oh, very well. But could you at least use a different adjective? I do not wish my age to be my defining characteristic."

"As the fussy mage desires."

"Oh, I give up."

#

"Kadan..."

Saitada sighed. "Lord Harrowmont still has much to offer, but neither he nor Bhelen can see that, and so they waste him." Sten glanced down at her, and she gave him a sad smile. "There is wisdom in your Qun, just as there is in the Chantry, and in the Shaperate. Knowledge of the complex is wisdom,

and from wisdom of the world comes wisdom of the self."

Sten nodded. "Mastery of the self is mastery of the world. Loss of the self is the source of suffering."

"Love is giving up a piece of the self. I didn't listen when Bhelen first started his plotting, and for that, Trian died. But for all their faults, I loved my brothers. Suffering is a choice, and we can refuse it. It is in our power to create the world, or destroy it. Let us hope what I have done here today is not the latter. Bhelen is king. Orzammar will endure"

"And you, Kadan?"

"I am content to be who I am. Come, Sten. We have an army to finish building."

#

Oghren stopped just before the stairs, and took a deep breath. "Give me a moment."

Saitada remembered the first time she'd seen sky. "Take your time."

"By the Stone, I feel like I'm about to fall off the world with all that sky up there."

"I remember that feeling. It passes," Saitada said.

"This one cheeky young jackass told me putting stones in my pockets would keep that from happening," Brosca said,

elbowing Alistair.

"Worked, didn't it?" Alistair said.

"Too bad. It's kind of like being drunk. But so much cheaper!" Oghren started forward again. "Well, let's get moving. We're losing... whatchacallit? Daylight."

#

Lenore was a little surprised to note that Jerath and Morrigan appeared to still be sharing a tent. After he'd all but threatened her back at the Anvil... She shrugged. They must have worked it out. Then again, Morrigan actually seemed to find Jerath's scariness attractive, so maybe... Nope, not going down that road.

She watched Brehan spar Sten, then her eyes widened as Brehan managed to best the qunari. He's certainly come a long way from the days when Duncan had rather casually smacked him around. Had he really taken on an ogre back in Bownammar? She sighed. She wanted to put all the events of the deep roads behind her.

Zevran came to sit next to her, and she smiled. "How well-versed are you in poetry?" Antivan poetry specifically?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I know a good poem when I hear it."

He laughed. "Well, trust me, then, you won't be hearing it

now." He kissed her hand. "It was recited to me, as I recall, by a rather wealthy target of mine. Let's see... 'The symphony I see in thee / it whispers songs to me / songs of hot breath upon my neck / songs of soft sighs by my head / songs of nails upon my back / songs of thee come to my bed.'"

She giggled. "This was told to you by a target?"

"Oh, I know, I know. I couldn't believe that she thought this would actually convince me to spare her." He shrugged. "I had sex with her anyway, but that goes without saying. She still had to die. The poem was amusing at the time, however, and thus I've always remembered it."

"Are you trying to seduce me with it?"

He ran a finger down her cheek. "Now that is a thought, isn't it? Would it work?"

She considered a moment, tapping her chin with one finger. "It... might."

"I'll have to keep that in mind. Personally, my preferred methods of seduction are a bit more... tactile. Here I thought you might be cheered up by some naughty poetry. You simply looked... unhappy, for a moment there. Such an unflattering expression for such a lovely face."

"I was thinking..." She glanced over at the combatants again. Jerath was demonstrating a maneuver to Alistair. Alistair twisted, and Jerath went over his shoulder to land on the

ground. Alistair's eyes widened, and he laughed gleefully before offering the other man a hand up. "We've walked a long road, and we are not yet to the end. These are not the best of times."

"Yes, I know." He sighed. "They never are, you see. Fortunately I tend to make do with whatever time I have. It's served me well, most days. You might learn to do the same."

"Will you tell me about that last mission now?"

He sighed. "Yes, I suppose it is time. You have been a good friend to me, after all. There is no reason to be silent. There is a reason I accepted this mission in Ferelden, far away from home, and it had nothing to do with any thought that I might leave the Crows. Meeting you, after all, was quite an accident." His face became grim. "My last mission before this one... did not end well."

"What happened?"

"You must realize that until that day I was cocky and arrogant. I was the best Crow in Antiva, I believed, and I bragged of my conquests often... both as an assassin and lover."

She gave him a disbelieving look. "You were more cocky and arrogant?"

He gave a small laugh. "Indeed. I was often told I was insufferable... right before I ended up in bed with someone. Such is how it was. One of the Crow masters grew tired of

my boasting. My bid for an incredibly difficult mark was accepted, much to my surprise: A wealthy merchant with many guards and completely silent. Taliesen agreed to be part of my team, as well as an elven lass named Rinna. She was... a marvel. Tough, smooth, wicked. Eyes that gleamed like justice. Everything I thought I desired."

She put her arm around him, and he rested his head on her bosom for a moment. "And you fell in love."

"Rinna was special. I had closed off my heart, I thought, but she touched something within me. It frightened me. When Taliesen revealed to me that Rinna had accepted a bribe from a merchant, told him of our plan, I readily agreed that she needed to pay the price and allowed Taliesen to kill her." He sighed into her shoulder. "Rinna begged me not to. On her knees, with tears in her eyes, she told me that she loved me and had not betrayed us. I laughed in her face and said that even if it were true, I didn't care."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "But that wasn't true."

"I convinced myself it was." He withdrew, and met her eyes. "Taliesen cut her throat and I watched her bleed as she stared up at me. I spat on her for betraying the Crows. When Taliesen and I finally assassinated the merchant we found the true source of his information. Rinna had not betrayed us after all."

"I'm so sorry."

"I... wanted to tell the Crows what we had done, our mistake. Taliesen convinced me not to. He said it would be a foolish wasted. So we reported that Rinna had died in the attempt." He shrugged. "We needn't have bothered. The Crows knew what we had done. The master who disliked me told me so to my face. He said that the Crows knew... and they didn't care. And one day my turn would come."

She felt the urge to fireball someone in the face returning. "Why would he do that?"

"To rub it in my face, perhaps. That I was nothing. That she was nothing." He sighed, and then kissed her before continuing. "You once asked why I wanted to leave the Crows. In truth, what I wanted was to die. What better way than to throw myself at a group of the fabled Grey Wardens?" He caressed her cheek. "And then... this happened. And here I am."

"Do you still want to die?"

He shook his head. "No. What I want is to begin again." His eyes grew warm. "Whatever it is I sought by leaving Antiva, I think I have found it. I owe you a great deal."

"I'm glad to have you with me."

He sighed, and then looked around the camp. "Where is our Brosca?"

"He was sitting next to me until just a few minutes before you

came over. He said something about wanting a bath."

"Oh. Perhaps we should go render him our assistance?"

"Now that sounds like a brilliant idea."

#

Cathiel grinned as Wynne walked over to where she was sitting with Alistair. Alistair immediately stood to make a fold his cloak and make a comfortable seat for Wynne, who smiled at him fondly. She sat down. "Have you heard much about the Grey Wardens of old?"

She smiled dreamily, snuggling into Alistair as he sat back down next to her. "I know they soared through the skies on griffons."

Wynne shook her head and laughed. "Griffons! Alas, that seems to be the only thing people remember from the tales - the mighty flying mounts that bore the Grey Wardens into battle."

"Well, I wish I had a griffon."

"Unfortunately, they've all passed back into the Maker's hand, so that wish will have to go unfulfilled."

She sighed. "I suppose I have to make do with Alistair."

Alistair laughed. "I now have a mental image of charging into battle with you sitting on my shoulders, shooting at

everything."

"Are we actually sure Jerath is the youngest of this particular group?" Wynne asked. She shook her head, and smiled. "It was said that watching the Wardens ride in on their white..."

"Gray."

"What?"

"Griffons were gray. I think that might be why they ended up calling us Grey Wardens."

"Gray griffons was enough to rouse a weary heart, and put the dance back in the step of an old man." Wynne leaned back, settling herself. "The Grey Wardens were powerful - feared and respected - but they also inspired the common people. I remember a tale that was told to me, many years ago..."

"Does the story have griffons in it?"

"Maker's mercy. It's like talking to a child!"

Cathiel turned up her nose and grinned. "If it doesn't have griffons in it, I don't want to hear it."

Wynne made a gesture that suggested she wanted to strangle something. "Yes... there are griffons in this story." She took a breath. "The Blight had ravaged the land for months, and the armies of the great kings had amassed for one last stand. As the sun burst through the clouds that boiled

and churned in the dark sky above, it illuminated a vast seething horde of darkspawn, with the archdemon at its head. And it was then- when courage seemed to fail, and all lost to death and despair - that the Grey Wardens came. They arrived with the beating of wings like mighty war drums, and stood before the armies of men."

"Griffons?" Cathiel asked.

"Yes... griffons. Now listen to the rest of the story." She nodded as Alistair put a hand over Cathiel's mouth. "The Grey Wardens, grim and fearless, marched forth, ever between the men and the encroaching darkspawn. They formed a shield of their own bodies and held that line until the archdemon was dead and the last darkspawn lay trampled in the dirt." Her voice grew quiet. "And then, demanding neither reward nor recognition for their sacrifice, the Grey Wardens departed. When the clouds finally rolled back and the sun shone full upon the blighted ground, the great kings knew that they had lost no men, and none of their blood had been spilled."

Cathiel bit Alistair's hand and he pulled it away and gave her a wounded look. "I like happy endings," she said.

"This is a tale about no battle the Grey Wardens have fought, and yet about them all. They have always defended us from the darkspawn, taking losses so that we do not have to. People may have forgotten over the centuries, but nothing has changed. This knowledge has been blessing and burden to Grey Wardens past, and now, it shall be your blessing, and your burden."

Cathiel glanced up at Alistair. "You know, if you do end up having to be king, you could do far worse than to recruit Wynne as your court mage."

"I... I could do that, couldn't I?" he asked. He looked at Wynne. "I mean, would you?"

She smiled. "Of course."

"That's... yeah, I think I'd like that. Assuming I don't find some way to get out of this." He frowned. "Didn't I hear you telling Jerath that story earlier?"

Wynne sighed. "Frankly, his comments about the poor tactical choices of the battle were considerably more irritating than Cathiel's griffon obsession."

#

Saitada finished filling Eamon in on the events of Orzammar, and left him to go check on the others. Leliana and Brehan were in the library, going over a map of the Brecilian forest as Brehan marked places they were most likely to find a caravan. She left him to it.

Jerath she found at the weapon range. He was attempting to teach Morrigan how to use a sword. A noise that sounded suspiciously like a giggle escaped the swamp witch as he moved her through a drill. She left them to it. The door to the room Lenore, Zevran, and Brosca were sharing was closed. The archdemon itself wouldn't get her to open it.

Alistair and Cathiel, she knew, were staying clear of the castle. Alistair seemed possessed of the notion that ignoring the king situation would make it go away. Cathiel, especially since Orzammar, was enabling his endeavor.

She found Oghren on the wall. "Come to talk to ol'Oghren, have you? Don't know why."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just... I guess we're pretty good friends now, right?" She wasn't sure she'd go that far, but she nodded to him anyway. "I just... I keep thinking about all that slag with Branka, how I've turned out. I always said I was this way because she left, but I think maybe... she left because of how I am."

"She underestimated you." And she was obsessed and unstable, and made her hope that one of Bhelen's first acts was to revamp the assembly's method of decided paragonhood.

"No, she just... estimated me. She knew how I was, and because of that, she left without me." He shrugged. "Worked out in my favor, though. I'm here fighting the good fight and not fed to Caridin's traps or her pet darkspawn. Did you want to talk about something?"

"What do you think of the surface so far?"

"It's sodding great. At first I was a little queasy, with all that

air, but... there's just so much of it! No one has any idea who you are. Or what you're doing. And the ale! Who'd have thought, ale made with grain!" He shrugged. "Aye, the surface is fine. It's not quite Orzammar, but it's fine." He sighed. "And you got me all misty again. I'll just be over there, if you need something killed."

46. Chapter 46

"Are we certain that was the right thing to do?" Brehan asked Leliana.

"You don't think furthering the cause of true love is a noble endeavor?" Leliana asked, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"Oghren."

"I... see your point. Still, Felsi seems to have his measure. It was sweet of you to help him out like that."

"Did you and the revered mother have a good chat?"

"Oh yes. She will be staying in Redcliffe." She kissed his cheek. "You won't believe how she got those children out of Lothering."

"Tell me."

"It was that trinket you gave her. She ran into some Dalish elves fleeing to the north, and showed it to one of the hunters. She told him a Dalish warden had given it to her, and the hunters got them past the darkspawn."

He shook his head, and laughed. "I... I never really understood why I offered it."

"I think the Maker guided your hand."

"Maybe He did."

#

"Cathiel?"

She turned to see Alistair. "Yes?"

"You know, I've been thinking..."

She started to make a smart remark, and then caught something in his eyes. "What have you been thinking about?"

"Back when we left Goldanna's, you told me I needed to look out for myself more than I do. I'm beginning to think you were right. I need to stop letting everyone else make decisions for me. I need to take a stand and think about myself for a change, or I'm never going to be happy."

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "It's about time, I say."

"Then from this point on, I'll be looking out for myself more. I should have done this a long time ago." He smiled. "I just wanted to thank you. Being with you is the one bright spot out of everything that's happened."

"I feel the same way." She wrapped her arms around him, and he held her for a moment. "I don't know if you've noticed this, but you've become rather impressive."

"Have I?"

"You took out an ogre. By yourself."

He blinked. "I did?"

She laughed. "You did. Remember, when we were looking for Jerath?"

His eyes widened. "I did, didn't I?"

She kissed him. "My hero."

#

"Hey Saitada."

"Alistair. What can I do for you?"

"I was looking for Jerath to do some sparing, but he's apparently teaching Morrigan to sword fight. Up for a bout?"

She nodded, and walked with him to the ring. "Your training is certainly paying off."

He smiled proudly, then parried her attack. They went back and forth for a few minutes. "I'm wondering something. I'd like to know your thoughts about some of our... traveling companions. Do you mind if I ask?"

"Not as long as you can talk and keep your shield up at the same time," she said. "Why do you want to know?"

"I've got this nefarious plan to go around to each of them and secretly tell them all the nasty things you said. That way they'll mutiny and I shall become the group leader!" He let out an evil laugh, spoiled a bit when he coughed.

"Jerath has mutinied twice already. If you want to lead, all you have to do is ask." She winked at him.

"What? Lead? Me? No, no, no. No leading. Bad things happen when I lead. We get lost, people die, and the next thing you know I'm stranded somewhere without any pants."

"Just so you know, I'm laughing at you, not with you." She fainted and managed to tag him in the side.

"Ouch. Now I'm wounded. Look at me, bleeding all over the place. You're just not very nice, are you?" He shrugged.
"Seriously though, I'm only curious."

"Who are you curious about?"

"How about Oghren? You must have an opinion on the smell, at least?"

"He's an excellent warrior."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say. For a drunk, he's an excellent warrior, right? How he lifts his sword is a bit of mystery."

"Before the drink, he won seven provings. I only managed five."

"Oh. Well, as long as we can point him in the right direction, he charges too. He has gusto, I'll give him that. Zevran. You can't... trust him, can you? Do you believe his so-called vow?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

"That's a lot to put on a 'maybe', isn't it? He's an assassin. The Crows aren't known for giving up. Maybe he's just biding his time?"

"Crows and Carta have a lot in common. And yet you trust Brosca." She tried a feint again, and he countered, bringing his shield in to knock her back a step. "I'm willing to give him a chance."

"Well, if you are, then maybe I should, too. But that doesn't mean I won't keep an eye on him. He's just too shifty. And... is he sleeping with Lenore or Brosca?"

"Pretty sure both."

"Think they know that?"

"Considering it's often at the same time, they are probably aware." She had to stop her blow as he stood there slack jawed. She laughed. "Alistair?"

"Sorry, it's just... no, not thinking about that. Lalalala. Okay, Lenore."

"If she'd stop flipping every switch, pulling every lever, activating every nexus, and summoning every demon we run

across, I might make it out of the blight with some of my hair still in place."

"What about Sten? He's... quiet... for someone so big."

"I respect him."

"The more I talk to him, the more reasonable he does seem. His philosophy is so strange, but it doesn't sound at all as vile as the Chantry describes it."

She went low, and he jumped the blade rather than parry it, bringing his own to lay against her shoulder. She raised an eyebrow. "Picked that up from Jerath?"

"He's fast. What about him?"

"Sometimes it's hard for me to remember he's only sixteen."

"I thought he was fifteen."

"We met him months ago. Apparently he had a birthday at some point in the intervening time. I admit, I thought Duncan was insane for recruiting him but now... He's skilled, and has been showing some good leadership skills. He certainly keeps Morrigan in line."

"Yeah, what about her?" He came in high, and she sidestepped, placing the point of her blade at his belly. "Do you trust her? Think about it... maybe Flemeth sent her with us for some other reason than she said."

"I've been more or less assuming that is a given, and Morrigan has motives of her own. Even Jerath doesn't trust her. She's useful though."

That's the most sensible thing I've heard out of you yet. Just remember that she's dangerous, too. And evil. And mean." He glanced at her. "Cathiel?"

"If I say anything other than nice things about Cathiel, you are going to sulk and cry."

"Well, not cry. Just pout a bit. Okay, Leliana. Is she crazy? Or do you really believe in her vision?"

"I believe that she believes in her vision."

He winced as she tagged him in the leg. "That's one way to put it. "I don't know what to make of her. If you look at her when she doesn't see you, sometimes she just looks so... so sad. Except when Brehan is around. What about him?"

"I think that he's grown into a fine young man since we found him in the woods."

Alistair laughed. "Yeah, from the little Duncan told me, he was starting to grow concerned somebody'd kill him before the Blight did."

"It was close, I admit." She tagged him in the other leg.

He shook his head. "I think my curiosity is sated, and my dignity bruised."

#

"Saitada, drink?"

Saitada glanced at where Oghren was sitting. "Afraid not. I'm heading out to look over the fortifications."

He nodded, then glanced behind her. "What about you, Junior?"

"No thank you."

"Come on, if you're old enough to tangle with ogres, you're old enough to throw back a mug."

"Your offer is appreciated, but I'd rather not."

Lenore shook her head. "Don't bother, Oghren. He doesn't drink."

"What?" Oghren shook his head in confusion. "You mean like, ever?"

"He is unfortunately dedicated to sobriety. It makes getting him out of his pants rather difficult," Zevran said, and gave regretful sigh.

"Morrigan doesn't seem to have that much trouble," Brosca said.

Saitada sighed. "Will you four be sober enough to get on the road in the morning?"

"I've got a tea for hangovers," Lenore said brightly.

"Oh for..." Saitada sighed, and glanced at Jerath. "At least morale is high. Care to help me check the fortifications?"

He nodded.

"Ah, Wynne..." Oghren called out to the mage. "Care to partake of Oghren's fine homebrew? It's the drink of the gods."

"Mm, ale, is it? And I hope it's brewed hygienically?"

"Of course! I may not know clean from a beggar's ass when it comes to most things, but I don't mess around with my ale."

"Very well, let's have a taste." She watched as he poured, then sniffed it before taking a drink.

Oghren leaned forward eagerly. "Well? Well? What do you think?"

"Very nice."

"You like it? well, I never..."

"Attractive amber color. Nutty flavor, slightly sweet, just a hint of toastiness. There's some spice to it... I'm finding hard to place..."

"Yes? Yes?" Oghren was nearly bouncing out of his chair.

"Is it... cloves?"

He smacked the table triumphantly. "Cloves! By the stone, you're a lady after my own heart. If I weren't buckled into this armor, I'd take you round the corner and... well, you know."

"Give me more ale?"

Saitada sighed, and left the room.

#

Cathiel felt a little envious of how lightly Brehan could move through the woods. She'd managed to keep pace with him in the Deep Roads, but here... How did he manage to keep up that pace without running face first into branches and trees? She grimaced as a spiderweb caught in her hair. Probably blood magic.

"Maker's breath! Where did you get that?" She heard Alistair ask. She turned to see him looking at Jerath. Jerath raised an eyebrow. "That sword."

"Oh. From the Drydens', at Soldier's Peak. Mikhael had it sent to Redcliffe for me." He offered it to Alistair.

Alistair whistled, and tested the balance. "That... is a nice sword." He gave it back almost reluctantly. "What does the writing on the hilt mean?"

Jerath shook his head. "Mikhael's little girl thought it needed a name."

"What'd she decide to call it?"

"Starfang."

"I like it. Next time something knocks you out, I'm stealing it."

#

Brehan held up his hand and gestured for the others to stay back, and continued forward on his own for several paces. Brosca almost jumped when the hunters seemed to almost materialize out of the woods around Brehan. "Andaran atish'an, my friend. You have come a long way. I give you the welcome of our clan." She looked back at the others. "These are curious companions you have. Might I ask the purpose of your visit?"

"I have come on behalf of the Grey Wardens, sister."

"The Grey Wardens? You... have joined their ranks? How unusual! Excuse my surprise... I will take you to the keeper right away."

Brehan turned and gestured for them to follow.

#

The huntress led them into a Dalish encampment. Saitada elbowed Brosca, and nodded to Lenore. Brosca immediately went to retrieve the mage from where she was starting to wander off. Saitada moved up until she was only a pace behind Brehan. She glanced up at his face, and blinked. From

his expression, there was clearly something wrong.

They were led to a small grouping of aravels. A man, his face more heavily tattooed than Brehan's, gave them a polite nod of greeting.

"Hmmm... I see we have guests... and one of our own, no less."

"This one is from one of our sister clans to the north, Keeper, but claims to have come on behalf of the Grey Wardens."

"The Grey Wardens? How unusual that one of our own should join their ranks. How did such a thing occur?"

Brehan gave the man a respectful bow. "They need all the assistance they can get."

"Hmmm..." Zathrian gave Brehan a contemplative look. "It is as I feared, then. Very well, let us speak. Ma serannas, Mithra, you may return to your post.

"Ma nuvenin, Keeper," the young woman bowed and left.

"Now, perhaps we might introduce ourselves. I am Zathrian, keeper and hahren of this clan. You are?"

"My name is Brehan, a pleasure to meet you. This is Saitada, my commander."

"If you came to bring news of the Blight in the south, it is not needed. I had already sensed its corruption. I would have

taken the clan north by now, had we the ability to move." He gestured to the camp. "Sadly, as you can see, we do not. Do not allow our troubles to burden you, though I suspect they may impact your mission. I imagine you are here regarding the treaty we signed centuries ago. Unfortunately, we may not be able to live up to the promise we made. This will require some... explanation. Please, follow me."

#

He led them to the center of the camp. Men, women, and even children were laying on hastily made pallets. Some looked badly injured. All appeared to be suffering. Brehan's face was dark. Saitada cast her senses, and blinked. She felt no tainted souls save for the wardens themselves.

Zathrian turned to look at them. "The clan came to the Brecilian Forest one month ago, as is our custom when we enter this part of Ferelden. We are always wary of the dangers in the forest, but we did not expect the werewolves would be lying in wait for us. They... ambushed us, and though we drove the beasts back, much damage was done. Many of our warriors lie dying as we speak. Even with all our magic and healing skill, we will eventually be forced to slay our brethren to prevent them from becoming beasts. The Blight's evil must be stopped, but we are in no position to uphold our obligations." He sighed. "I am truly sorry."

"Is there no way to help your men?" Brehan asked. He saw the faces of his own clan in the eyes of the injured.

"The affliction is a curse that runs rampant in their blood, bringing great agony and then ultimately either death or a transformation into something monstrous. The only thing that could help them must come from the source of the curse itself, and that..." He shook his head. "That would be no trivial task to retrieve."

Brehan gestured at his companions. "We are good at non-trivial tasks."

Zathrian looked them over, then returned his gaze to Brehan. "Within the Brecilian Forest dwells a great wolf - we call him Witherfang. It was within him that the curse originated, and through his blood that it has been spread. If he is killed and his heart brought to me, perhaps I could destroy the curse, but this task has proven too dangerous for us. I sent some hunters into the forest a week ago, but they have not returned. I cannot risk any more of my clan."

Brehan gave Saitada a beseeching look. She glanced back at the others. They were a mix of frustrated and encouraging looks, but no actual objection. She nodded to Brehan. "We'll find this Witherfang for you" he told the Keeper.

"I must warn you that more than werewolves lurk in the Brecilian Forest. It has a history full of carnage and murder, you see. Where there is so much death, the Veil separating the spirit realm from our own becomes thin, allowing spirits to possess things living or dead. But if you can indeed help..." He sighed, and then nodded. "Then I wish you luck."

"We will need some supplies," Saitada noted.

"Then I suggest you see Master Varathorn. I will instruct him to put aside some supplies for you, the kind that the hunters use."

#

"Walk into the forest and cut out the heart of a particular werewolf?" Lenore asked, her tone skeptical. "It can't be that simple."

Brehan nodded. "It won't be. He was not exaggerating the dangers of the forest. My clan never stayed in this forest long."

Saitada nodded. "Lenore, Wynne, see if you can't assist the clan healers a little, find out a bit more about this affliction. Brehan, what would you suggest?"

"We might speak with the storyteller. He might know something more about the area." Brehan frowned thoughtfully. "And we should seek out Master Varathorn, stock up on potions before we go in."

Saitada nodded. "We should rest a bit before heading out into the forest."

Brehan glanced at the others hesitantly. "I'd stay close to the center of camp and be mindful. The Dalish are unused to strangers in their midst and..."

"Occasionally resemble the north end of a southbound donkey?" Brosca asked innocently.

"Just keep in mind that my clan considered me quite charming," Brehan said with a smile.

"Maker have mercy," Cathiel muttered fondly.

#

They found the storyteller at the fire.

"Andaran atish'an, Lethallin! Would you come and help us break our fast?"

Brehan gestured at his companions. "We would like that."

He spread his hands in a gesture of welcome. "Come, then, and sit. Join us by the fire. I am Hahren Sarel, the clan's storyteller. You have one in your own clan I assume?"

"Yes, Paivel, our elder. I was his apprentice."

"Ah! Hahren Paivel still lives? That is good, for he was old even when I was but da'len. How lucky you are to have been reared with his tales. I notice you are... not alone. These companions of yours are Grey Wardens like yourself?"

"Some of them, yes."

"I am Leliana, and no Grey Warden at all. I am honored to be here; I've heard so much about your people."

"Andaran atish'an - enter this place in peace. I do find it odd that any of your kind would so readily follow one of the Dalish." He glanced at Brehan. "Do you suppose you have been made a Grey Warden simply to get our assistance? Maybe they think we would not live up to the treaty otherwise."

"I assure you that's not the case." He was about to tell Sarel about how he'd been saved by Duncan when the man angrily shook his head.

"Oh, you do, do you? No offense, young one, but you don't know half the-"

"Please, Hahren Sarel, you are being most unkind to one who is not only of our blood, but also a guest who is here to help us."

"Of course... I apologize for my rudeness. Our losses have been great and I am... not myself."

"The hahren's own wife has perished from the werewolf's curse. We are mourning her death, here, and so many more to come."

"Not if I can help it." Brehan gave Sarel a gesture of respect.

"We are glad to hear it. I should not have suspected otherwise. These have not been easy days for us, and the idea that we may yet have to abandon our ill to their fate... But let us not dwell on our problems. Is there something we can

do to help you in your quest?"

"What can you tell us about the forest?"

"I know a few tales. Our clan has passed this way many times before, even when the shemlen lived in these parts. If you wish, I can tell you what I know. It is not a long story."

"Yes, tell us of the forest."

"Our legends say that before the shemlen came, the Brecilian forest was a place of our ancestors that predated even our oldest homeland. The people of the Imperium came here and gave the forest its name. If they found traces of our ancestors, we cannot say. If they did, those elves were slain or enslaved. We know only that a great many battles were fought here; these trees grow upon the graves of those who fell - shemlen and elves both."

"And those battles... tore the Veil?" Lenore asked.

"Indeed, very wise of you. There was so much death that the Veil into the Beyond was torn. The shemlen know the Beyond as "the Fade", the place of dreams and spirits. When the Veil is torn, spirits pass into our world freely. The legends say that one great spirit possessed the wolf that became Witherfang, who passed its curse of rage onto men and created werewolves.

"This Witherfang still exists today?" Brehan asked.

"So Zathrian insists. He says that Witherfang does not age as the werewolves do. Witherfang is as much spirit as it is beast, and thus it is immortal. Perhaps it cannot even be slain. At the very least, it is old and powerful, much as Zathrian himself."

Saitada leaned forward. "How many werewolves are there?"

"No one knows. When the shemlen lived in these parts, the curse would spread anew to a few of them with each passing year. They would run off into the forest, never to be seen again. Eventually, all the shemlen left. One assumes the werewolves survive by passing their curse to their offspring. They have had no new blood... until now, that is."

Brehan glanced back towards the wounded. "Have the hunters become werewolves?"

"It is said that one or two have turned already, though the keeper denies it. As for the rest, they will either die or turn, unless..." He sighed. "They are killed out of mercy. I would rather die than become a ravening, soulless beast. Wouldn't you?"

Brehan nodded. That was the very choice that would one day await him. "That's all we needed to know."

"One last warning: the forest is like a thing alive. It changes as it wills, closing paths behind you and opening up new ones. Too many have become lost within, unable to find their way out. Were I you I would endeavor not to make the forest my enemy."

"Have you ever heard of an elf named Aneirin?" Jerath's voice asked quietly.

Wynne glanced at him in surprised. "I... I appreciate you trying to find him but what are the chances - -"

"Aneirin the healer...?"

"You... know Aneirin?"

Wynne looked shocked. "He... he lives? No, it can't be him. Perhaps it is a common elven name..."

"No, I know of only one Aneirin."

"Ah, it make sense! Aneirin said that he was from the human cities. You are old friends then?"

"If it is the same Aneirin, then yes, Wynne knows him," Jerath said.

"If you seek Aneirin, you must venture into the forest. He prefers to be amidst the trees and the animals."

"Thank you all so much." Brehan thought he saw a small tear in Wynne's eyes as she spoke.

#

Brehan led Leliana over to the halla enclosure. The bard's eyes lit up at the sight of the animals. "Oh, they are beautiful."

A woman looked up, startled. "Who comes-?! Aneth ara! I was so busy attending the halla, I did not hear you coming."

Brehan gave her a concerned look, then gestured. "I notice you've separated this halla from the herd."

"I fear she may have been bitten during the werewolf attack. I have tried speaking with her, but she is too agitated for me to understand. The curse would not affect her as it would us, but it would still be lethal. And it may prove contagious to the other halla as well. I can find no wound on her, but if she's truly ill, then..." She sighed. "Then I will have to put her out of her misery. For her sake as well as that of the others."

Brehan frowned. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I don't know. Do you have any skills that might help her? If you do, I would be grateful."

Brehan gently extended a hand to the halla, letting it grow accustomed to his scent before he caressed its nose gently. It blew air on his hand, but let him approach, calming as he spoke to it softly in elvish.

"Yes... that's it. She's calming down! That's it, love. Be calm. Tell me what troubles you..." She pressed her ear to the halla's throat as the halla made a soft, almost trilling noise. "Ah, I see. It is her life-mate who is sick, not her. He was bitten on the leg during the attack and she fears greatly for him. I did not realize another halla was injured. This will allow me to prevent the sickness from spreading to the entire herd."

Ma serannas. You have done my clan a great boon this day. I will always be grateful for your help."

Brehan smiled. "Unnecessary. It's... good, to see halla again. Some days I miss them more than my clan." He rubbed the halla gently, and she responded by leaning into him affectionately, pinning him between herself and the enclosure and making the liquid trilling sound again.

"May I..." Leliana asked hesitantly. Elora gave her a friendly nod as she went to check on the other halla. Brehan continued petting the halla with one hand as he gently extended his other to Leliana. She took it and approached slowly. The halla took a step backwards, but extended her neck to sniff at Leliana's outstretched hand. She allowed Leliana to stroke her nose a few times before moving away. "Oh, she was so soft... silkier than a horse. More like... like a rabbit or cat."

Brehan smiled. "Smarter than a horse as well. They can be stubborn, but have long been friends to the Dalish. Horses must be led. Halla know where they are going."

"Thank you for showing me."

He smiled, then leaned and whispered to the halla. "I have to go now. I have to help save our friends."

It made one more trilling noise, then stepped back so he could leave. Leliana raised an eyebrow. "Do they really understand you?"

"At least on the same level Griffon understands Cathiel."

#

"You're a dwarf, aren't you? If you get no sun, shouldn't you be all white?"

Saitada grinned at the Dalish child. "No, we dwarves come in all colors, just like rocks do."

"I've never seen a rock that color before" the child said, pointing at Saitada's hair.

"Ah, but have you seen lava before? Stone hot enough to become molten?"

The child's eye widened in fascination. "I wish I could see Orzammar some day. Does it really have a great lake of lava?"

"It does indeed. Waterfalls flow down into it from the Diamond Quarter."

"Wow!" The child glanced over at Jerath. "How come you aren't a Dalish like us?"

Saitada chuckled. "Surely you know not all elves are Dalish? Jerath here is from the cities."

The child pondered that a moment. "Are you very sad? Elves shouldn't have to live with humans if they don't want to. It's too bad you don't have a clan of your own."

Jerath stood and walked away, leaving the child looking after him curiously. Saitada sighed before addressing the child. "So, where are your markings? I thought all Dalish were born with them."

"No, silly, you don't get them until you are a grown up."

#

The pitying looks annoyed him. They had their lives. He had his. He supposed he could pity them for never being able to stay in one place for more than a few days. Then Jerath sighed, and told himself he was being unfair. The Dalish were what they were, and he knew Brehan had been just as uncomfortable and stared at in Denerim.

Another of the Dalish saw him. This one, however, simply nodded. "I greet you, stranger. It is good to see another elf, even if you are not one of the wander clans. I trust my people have not been too harsh in their treatment of you?"

"I don't mind. I understand." He was strange to them, and they weren't at their best.

"That is very generous of you. Most would assume we are unkind as a rule, and that is not the case... especially not to a Grey Warden. But we have lost much, and it is easy to forget simple niceties at such a time. I understand you will search for the wolves in the Brecilian Forest. I would join you, but Zathrian has... forbidden me."

Jerath raised an eyebrow. "Forbidden you?"

The other man looked frustrated. "We are banned from entering the forest now. I have... more cause than most, but I will not disobey my keeper."

"Why do you want to enter the forest?"

He sighed. "I suppose there is no harm in telling a fellow elf, but surely you have greater concerns than any problem of mine, no?"

The longer he was involved in this conversation, the better excuse he'd have not to go back over to where everyone was staring. "I'd like to hear about it."

"Well, perhaps you could help me with it. I would certainly appreciate anything you could do. My wife, Danyla, and I both fought the werewolves in the ambush. She was injured so gravely the curse spread rapidly in her. Zathrian fought hard to ease her pain, but there was little he could do. And though he says that Danyla is dead, he will not let me see her... her body. I am beginning to believe she became a werewolf, and that it is being kept from me so I do not go chasing after her... If I could just... know if Danyla is alive, or what happened to her... then I could be at peace."

"I'm sorry, that's terrible."

"Ma serannas - thank you. The keeper means well, but... I must discover the truth truth for myself. If you are in the

forest, perhaps you might... come across her, alive or dead. Any news would be better than none. And in return, I would be happy to gift you an amulet made by our craftsmen. It may fetch you some coin in the human lands."

"I'll see what I can do." They were going out into the woods anyway. Briefly, he wondered what it was about him that made so many approach him for help. Some sort of lingering aura from the spirit?

"You are most kind."

He saw Saitada gesture to him. "I should go."

47. Chapter 47

"Darkpawn. Hurlocks." Brehan pointed. "Not many."

"Let's clear them out, just to be safe," Saitada said.

It took them only moments. Tracks caught Brehan's eyes. He gestured for Saitada's attention, then jerked his head and began following the tracks. They led him to a hunter, a wounded man that had tried to crawl into a shelter.

"Wynne?" he called out.

The mage worked her healing magic over the hunter, and he opened his eyes. "What? Who... wh-who comes?" The wounded man focused his eyes on Brehan. The irises were starting to turn to gold.

"You're badly wounded. What happened to you?"

"We were sent to find Witherfang... bring his heart... attacked... I..." He passed out again.

Saitada glanced over at Brehan as Wynne and Lenore set to work on the injured Dalish. "Darkspawn in the woods, and the camp stripped of its defenders. Brosca, you and Sten take the injured man back to the camp. Shale, Zevran, Oghren, and Leliana go with them, shore up their defenses and make sure

they know of the darkspawn."

Sten nodded.

Brosca grinned. "And if you aren't back by morning, come rescue you?"

Saitada grimaced. "The thought crossed my mind."

#

Brehan and Cathiel took point as they continued into the woods. Saitada and Sten stayed close to the mages, as Jerath and Alistair brought up the rear. Brehan held up a fist, bringing the party to a halt just before a footbridge over the small stream they'd been following. He sniffed at the air and gestured for them to be on guard, when werewolves burst out of the woods in front of them.

One of them drew itself up. Dark brown fur covered the beast, which stood nearly seven feet in height. It snarled. "Hrrr... The watch-wolves have spoken truly, my brothers and sisters." It snapped at him. "Another of the Dalish, come to put us in our place, come to make us pay for our attack."

Brehan blinked. "You speak? I thought werewolves were savage beasts."

"We are beasts, but we are no longer simple and mindless. Let that thought chill your spine. You speak to Swiftrunner. I lead my cursed brothers and sisters. Hrrr. Turn back now, go

back to the Dalish and tell them that you have failed. Hrrr. Tell them we will gladly watch them suffer the same curse we have suffered for too long. We will watch them pay!"

Saitada looked at the wolves, taking in both their size and their claws. "You're the werewolves who ambushed the Dalish, then?"

"We are." It slashed a claw at the air in Brehan's direction. "I regret only that we did not inflict every single one of them with the curse that night."

Saitada glanced at Brehan. He shook his head, just as confused as she was. "You sound as if you hate the Dalish a great deal."

"That we do. How dare they send you here against us! Turn and leave, while you still have the chance!"

Brehan shook his head. "I would prefer to talk to you. I mean you no harm."

Swiftrunner snarled. "Was it not Zathrian who sent you? Hrrr. He wishes only our destruction, never to talk!"

"You talk of Zathrian as if you know him." Brehan narrowed his eyes. The hahren seemed to have left a few things out.

"Hrrr. We have never met, he and I. He would not survive the experience, I swear it."

"Why, exactly? Why do you hate him so much?"

"You know nothing, do you? Nothing of us and even less of those you serve. You are a fool, and we are done talking. Run from the forest while you can. Run to the Dalish and tell them they are doomed."

#

Cathiel's arrow caught the first of the charging wolves in the throat, dropping it in its tracks, but the others were upon them almost before she could nock her next arrow. She noted almost absently that these werewolves were more feral in appearance than Swiftrunner and his companions had been. Beside her, Griffin snarled, and she adjusted her shot to take the werewolf coming in from her left.

The wolves with the werewolves circled the combatants, coming in to try to flank the warriors. The mages kept a steady stream of spells to prevent the fighters from getting overwhelmed.

Griffin let out a furious bark and Cathiel whirled to take aim at the werewolves coming from behind them. Jerath threw himself into Wynne, knocking the older mage out of the path of a leaping werewolf. The humongous wolf bore the elf to the ground and closed its jaws around his arm before Morrigan unleashed a bolt of lightning into the beast. Jerath rolled from under it as it twitched and opened its throat with his sword. His left arm hung limp, but he stepped back into the fray, keeping the wolves from getting to the casters as Wynne got back to her feet.

A werewolf, its fur singed and smoking, raked its claws down Cathiel's leg before Griffon's jaws closed around its throat. Alistair charged in to take the pressure off Jerath. Lenore downed a potion before gathering power around her hands. The resulting fireball took out the charging wolves as well as several trees as the mage collapsed in exhaustion.

Saitada smashed the last werewolf to the ground with her shield, and Brehan took the opportunity to smash its skull open with his maul.

"Status?" Saitada asked, walking to where Wynne was helping into a sitting position

Brehan wiped the gore from his maul. "To used to being able to sense our enemies coming. These things are as tough as ogres."

Alistair half-carried Cathiel to the mages, ignoring her protest. Morrigan began healing the scratches Jerath had taken while guiding him to Wynne. Jerath sat heavily next to Lenore. Wynne knelt next to him and frowned. "Brehan, would you give me a hand here? It needs to be set before I can heal it."

Brehan nodded, and took Jerath's arm. The smaller elf grunted as Brehan slid the bone back into place and held it while Wynne wove the healing spell into the injury. Wynne then quickly repeated the spell on Cathiel.

Saitada surveyed the group. "Do we need to return to the camp?"

Wynne frowned. "Lenore, Morrigan, and I could use a bit of a rest, but we'll be fine. I'm more concerned about Cathiel and Jerath."

Cathiel frowned. "I've been scratched worse than that doing needlepoint."

"It's not the wound that worries me," Wynne said.

Saitada frowned. "You think they might have been infected?"

"It's a possibility we must consider. We don't know if the taint will protect you from the werewolf curse."

"All the more reason to keep moving," Jerath said.

"How's your arm?" Saitada asked.

Wynne answered before Jerath could, "he's lost a fair amount of blood, but the arm was a clean break."

"Keep an eye on them. We'll rest for an hour, and then keep going." Saitada looked over the dead wolves. "These seem to be different than the ones we met earlier."

"Feral." Brehan said. "Possibly rabid. I doubt these ones could talk."

#

"Thoughts?" Saitada said.

"That Swiftrunner guy really wanted to eat Brehan," Lenore said.

Saitada sighed. "Useful thoughts?"

"The Hahren knew more than he told us," Brehan said. He frowned.

"Some of the Dalish are starting to turn," Jerath said.

"You sure?" Brehan asked.

Jerath pointed, and then started walking up the path.

A werewolf was crouched by some rocks, watching them.

"Dammit, Jerath, get back here!" Saitada yelled. She sighed, and started after him.

The werewolf stayed crouched as he approached. It sniffed at him. "P-please... help... listen..." It lowered itself a bit more as he came closer. "I am not... the mindless beast I appear to be..."

Saitada shook her head as Jerath went closer, crouching down in front of the beast. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"They... I am cursed, turned into this creature. The curse, it... it burns in me!" It gave an agonized cry. "I... fled into the forest. The werewolves, they... took me in. But I had to return. I had to!" It moved closer to him.

Saitada saw Cathiel lift her bow, and held up a hand to prevent her from loosing an arrow.

"You are... an elf, but not one of the Dalish. I was, until my... change. Have you... seen my clan?" it asked, gasping as it spoke.

"Danyla."

"Yes."

"Your keeper, Zathrian, is the one who sent us here."

"The keeper sent you? Then..." it drew back slightly. "You seek Witherfang."

"Yes."

"I know why you seek him. But..." it moved forward again, reaching out and setting it's clawed hand on Jerath's arm. Cathiel glanced at Saitada again. Saitada shook her head. "There is no time to explain. You must listen..." It shook in pain. "The scarf I wear... bring it to Athras. Tell him I love him. Tell him... I am dead and with the gods. I beg you..."

"I spoke to Athras. He worries about you."

"I want him to be at peace... He is a good man. Please do not... let him suffer thinking of me." The werewolf screamed in pain. "The curse... is fire in my blood!"

Jerath stood, and drew his blade. The werewolf looked up at

him beseechingly. "Yes. Please! End it for me! End it quickly!"

The blade came down, and the wolf went still. He bent and took the scarf before returning to the others.

"Maker," Alistair whispered under his breath.

#

Not for the first time, Cathiel wondered if Lenore actually were mad. She watched the mage talking to the hermit, apparently engaging him in some kind of game of riddles. Next to her, Saitada just looked rather resigned to what Lenore was doing.

She felt Alistair's hand on the small of her back, and turned to see a worried look on his face. "I'm fine," she assured him.

"No sudden growth of back hair."

"What about cravings for undercooked roast?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light.

"I promise, if I get the urge to bite anything, you'll be the first to know."

He gave her a suspicious look. Cathiel leaned into him, and watched Lenore trade a book for an acorn before coming back over to them. "He says werewolf lair is to the north, but there are trees enchanted to block the path. He can give us a way to fool the trees so that they will let us pass, but we have to go kill an oak for him first."

Saitada sighed. "Brehan, I think there was an oak just before

we..."

"Oh, not any oak. The talking one."

"The..." Saitada shook her head. "Lenore, I am going to count to three, and then you are going to start making some bloody sense."

"He's probably talking about a sylvan," Brehan said. When she glanced at him, he shrugged. "Trees possessed by demons. This section of forest has a bloody history, and it's not uncommon for spirits to be drawn over the veil and end up inhabiting a living tree instead of a living body."

"A... possessed tree. You are having me on."

He chuckled and pointed to a scar on his arm. "One nearly killed Tamlen and I, about six years ago, on the edge of the Korcari Wilds."

#

"Whatcha think of the Dalish?" Brosca asked as he and Zevran walked a patrol circuit around the camp.

Zevran shrugged. "I know little enough of the Dalish other than the fact that my mother was one. Or so I was told. She had fallen in love with an elven woodcutter and accompanied him back to the city, leaving her clan behind for good. And there, of course, the woodcutter died of some filthy disease and my mother was forced into prostitution to pay off his debts."

Oldest tale in the book."

"That's sodding horrible."

"Is it? It seemed normal enough a tale growing up, no different than the other elven boys in the whorehouse." He shrugged again. "I didn't know my mother, either, of course. She died giving birth to me. My first victim, as it were. We were all raised communally by the whores. It was a happy enough existence, ignoring the occasional beating, until eventually I was sold to the Crows. I brought a good price, so I hear."

"Sorry ta hear it."

"Compassion and rugged good looks in the same man. It is a delight, truly, though what you say is unnecessary even if it is appreciated." He shrugged. "It could have been much worse. Shall I tell you about what happened to the other whorehouse boys who did not fetch a decent price with the Crows?"

"Got a fairer idea than I'd like," Brosca muttered.

Zevran shot him a surprised look, then nodded. "People like you and I are not the product of happy lives of contentment."

"You can say that again."

"People like..." he cut off when Brosca smacked him lightly across the rear. "My original point is that my mother's Dalish nature was always a point of fascination for me." He sighed.

"Through all the years of my Crow training, the one thing of my mother's that I possessed was a pair of gloves. They were of Dalish make, I knew that much, and beautiful. I had to keep them hidden, of course, as we were not allowed such things. Eventually they were discovered, and I never saw them again."

"Sod it, you had any happy times?" Brosca shook his head. At least he'd had Rica.

"Oh, there has been plenty. To tell the truth, it is because I expected nothing more. Still, even I eventually thought that it would be better for me if I ran off to join the famous Dalish when one of their clans drew near Antiva City." He chuckled ruefully. "Naturally the reality did not live up at all to the fantasies I had constructed as a boy, staring at those gloves. But," he waved dismissively. "Such is life."

#

"Brehan, you left out that the damn things could walk!"

"I said one nearly killed me!" Brehan yelled back. "You really think I'm stupid enough to almost get killed by an inanimate object?"

"Do not make me answer that question," Saitada said, slashing at a branch with her sword as she tried to keep it wrapping around her. "How did you kill it?"

"Fireball," Brehan yelled.

"Oh, that's me," Lenore said, and gathered the spell to her. The resulting flame sent a shower of smoldering embers and kindling everywhere. Saitada used her shield to protect herself and Wynne.

"Are we done?" Saitada asked.

"I don't think so." Brehan glanced at her. "That was a willow, and I didn't hear it talking."

"You're the forest expert. Go find me a talking oak tree."

"Heh. When you first joined the Grey Wardens, did you ever once think you'd find yourself giving that order?" Alistair asked.

"Cathiel, shoot him."

#

Lanaya gave Brosca a slightly disapproving look. "I am told you were instrumental in bringing our Cammen and Gheyne together."

"That a problem?"

"Not strictly speaking, though by our traditions Cammen is still da'len: a child. It is not an appropriate match at this time."

Brosca grinned up at her. "Who am I to stand in the way of love?"

"We try to teach our young to wean themselves off the impatience that humans suffer from. Their belief that everything must happen now is what destroyed us long ago."

"Ain't sure you noticed, but I'm not exactly human."

She shook her head, and then smiled. "There is no real harm in what you did. I do not doubt your intentions were good."

Brosca shrugged. "If this whole blight thing has taught me anything, it's not to underestimate elf kids. The one that travels with us kills ogres the way most folks swat mosquitoes. Don't mind my sayin, you got a different accent than the rest. Different clan, or..."

"My parents were servants to a human merchant whose caravans plied the southern routes. One day, bandits killed him and my parents both. I was the only survivor, just a young girl, and the bandits took me. I was their... servant... for several years."

"They get dead?" With all the chaos in Ferelden, he didn't like to think about how often her story might be repeated.

"Yes."

"Good." At least with Alistair's butt going on the throne, there would be a chance to do something. Maybe he'd grab Lenore and Zevran and go start taking care of the bandit problem after they were done with the darkspawn.

"Long years have reflection have allowed me to come to terms with it, to put them in perspective." She smiled and looked around the ships. "I can only imagine what would have happened had the clan not saved me from them. I owe them my life for that. And more."

"How'd they happen to rescue you?"

"The bandits killed a scout when the clan passed near their camp. When the clan discovered him, Zathrian came looking for his killers. He followed their tracks for almost a month. And when he finally caught up to us, he fell on the bandits like a terror. No one could stop him. I sat there and watched him attack them in a blur, and I reveled in every blow. When he saw me, the fury in his eyes turned to pity. He took me back to the clan and I have been here ever since."

"So you became keeper?"

"I am not a keeper. I am Zathrian's first. Though because I was not born into the clan, becoming his first was very difficult. We Dalish have old traditions."

"Noticed. Can't travel with Brehan and not."

She laughed. "The clans come from the ranks of the nobility that once ruled the Dales, you see. The keepers of the clan have the strongest and purest blood that reaches back to the days of Arlathan. I had to compete against the other candidates for first, to be better than them in everything simply because I was not of the old blood."

"So if Brehan's daddy was a keeper, does that make him some kind of elf prince?"

"No, it doesn't work quite like that."

"Old and pure blood might 'splain why everything we encounter tries to eat him." She glanced down at him, her lips twitching. "What did Zathrian think of all that?"

"He was proud of me. I've always thought of him as a father, in a way, and he could not hide his pleasure when I became his first. The clan has placed great trust in me. One day, I will lead them and be the one who secures our future."

He nodded. "Good on you. If'n you don't mind my askin, well... some of your folks have been just a bit... well... hostile." He shrugged.

She sighed. "They have reason. Since the days of Arlathan, my people have been either subjugated or homeless."

"Arlathan... Brehan's got a few stories about the place. Good ones."

"It was our ancestral home, long ago with the humans first came to these lands. We were free then, and immortal. We did not know how to deal with the humans and in the end, they turned their power against us and destroyed Arlathan. Our ancestors were enslaved and our culture lost forever."

"Weren't that those Tevinter? Same folks what cause the

blight?"

"Yes."

"Elves eventually got free though. At least most places."

"Yes. After a millennium of slavery, our people were freed by Andraste, the human's prophet who spawned the Chantry."

"So how come you don't worship that Maker fellow?"

"We worship the Creators, as we always have. We give thanks to Andraste for her part in our freedom, but we do not worship her or her god."

Brosca nodded. "I wonder why elves still get dumped on like they were casteless."

"Casteless?"

"Dwarves that dwarves don't really consider to be dwarves. Like me."

"And your other friend?"

Brosca laughed. "Nah, believe it or not, she used to be a princess. Actually, I think she is again. At least her brother is the one sitting on the throne down there. But try not to hold that against her, she's good people."

"She has gone to help our hunters." Lanaya's lips twitched again. "I will try, very hard, not to hold her nobility against

her."

He winked at her. "For a good cause. Once your people join up, I reckon we got this Blight thing up and handled."

"You have a high opinion of the Dalish."

Brosca chuckled. "Songbird was an apprentice storyteller. And I've seen him smash an ogre's face in with that hammer of his. And Junior? He ain't Dalish, but I've seen him stab a high dragon in the brain. Stone, once this witherfang business is dealt with, I plan to just go up to the Archdemon and tell him 'might want to turn your little horde around and slink back to your nest, we got elves.' And then, beer. I'm buyin." He considered. "So what do you Dalish drink, anyway?"

#

Jerath ignored the burning sensation under his skin. The transformation seemed to take days, from what he'd heard around the camp. There was plenty of time, and he'd rather not endure another round of Wynne fussing over him. They were already doing all they could to solve the problem.

"This is strange. The werewolves would not use such a camp, would they? Whoever this belongs to must be nearby." Wynne looked around.

"It could belong to some of the Dalish hunters," Saitada suggested.

"It doesn't look Dalish," Brehan said.

Griffon whined and yawned.

"Look around," Saitada said. She was staring at the fire as if hypnotized.

Alistair blinked, and then shook his head. "I sense magic at work. The fire is... it's weakening us. Can you feel it? It... it wants us to stay."

Saitada sat down next to the fire, adding a stick. Across from her, Morrigan sat down on one of the bedrolls, smoothing it before laying upon it. Jerath started to walk towards her. No. He blinked.

Alistair took Cathiel's hand, and pulled her with him into the tent. Brehan sat across from Saitada, as Wynne seated herself on a log. Jerath started to take another step. His legs felt leaden. No. He blinked, and shook his head. *Get away. Now.* Morrigan patted the bedroll next to her and smiled at him invitingly. *It's a trap. Can't you feel it?* "Why are you making camp?" he asked.

"It's a lucky find. It must have been abandoned not long ago," Brehan said. He started to unstrap his armor.

The veil is thin here. "We need to leave. Now."

"Oh, don't be such a spoilsport," Lenore said. She laid down on one of the bedrolls, curling herself into a ball and closing

her eyes.

He could see it now, the spirits beyond the veil. Saitada's eyes were closing, as were Brehan's. Jerath saw Morrigan start to nod off. The fatigue was starting to drag at him. *The duty cannot be forsworn*. He reached across, touching the familiar mind. And rage filled him. He drew his sword as the shade appeared.

#

Dimly he heard Saitada's voice call his name. They were waking. "Thank you," he whispered, as he felt the spirit leave him once more. He took a moment to compose his face before turning around.

They were looking around, confusion on their faces. He sheathed the sword. "An abandoned camp in the middle of a demon haunted forest full of werewolves, and you all decide to take naps?" He shook his head, and then gestured at the now visible pile of bodies on one end of the camp.

"Clearly, this site is enchanted," Wynne said.

Saitada shook her head and stood up. "What were we doing?"

"I think... we were hunting a talking oak tree... or did I just dream that?" Lenore asked.

"No, I think that is actually what we were doing," Brehan said.

Alistair pushed the tattered remnants of the tent off himself and Cathiel, and then stood up. He glanced at Jerath. "How come it didn't affect you?"

"Youthful vigor. Shall we move on?" His blood was beginning to feel like it was scalding. He had to push anger back when they took their time looking around the camp. It wasn't the same as it had been before. The rage wasn't separate. In some ways, that made it easier.

#

"There is a stand of oaks, just through there," Brehan reported.

"How do we find the right one?"

Lenore considered the question. "It's probably going to have some residual fade energy and..."

"Lenore, go with Brehan. The rest of you, be ready to kill what they point at."

"Yes, oh fearless leader," Alistair said.

Lenore followed Brehan towards the grove. A couple of the trees seemed to bend and sway in their direction, but none actually moved towards them. An oak with light colored leaves shook as they approached. A voice, sounding almost intrigued, seemed to float from it as it turned to face them. "What manner of beast be thee that comes before this elder

tree?"

Lenore blinked. "Can't you see me? I am a human."

"Ahhhh, yes, I remember thy kind. So brief of life and all but blind to the peril you cause, the lives you take, such chaos is sown within they wake." A branch extended, stopping about a foot from her. "Allow me a moment to welcome thee. I am called the Grand Oak, sometimes the Elder tree."

Lenore reached out and took the branch, shaking it as she would a hand. "I am pleased to meet you. I'm Lenore Amell."

Brehan just stared at her in disbelief. He looked back at Saitada, who was sighing and shaking her head. Then he looked back at Lenore. Morrigan's voice was incredulous. "It... rhymes? 'Tis a rhyming tree. One can only imagine what manner of spirit is involved here."

The oak's voice grew hopeful. "And unless thou thinkst it far too soon, might I ask of thee a boon?"

"Why do you speak in rhymes?"

"I do not know. Why dost thou not? Thy words seem plain, a mundane lot. Perhaps a poet's soul's in me... Does that make me a poet tree?" It laughed, leaves shaking.

Lenore smiled with delight. "A poet tree. Yes, I get it."

"It was but a simple jest, a jibe to entertain my guest." The tree seemed to bow.

Lenore nodded. "I have a question, if I could. We met a hermit in the wood."

Brehan threw up his hands and walked back to the others.

"That is the thief, the one I seek. It is he who rendered my future bleak."

"Perhaps you could assist us with our plan, we have to save the Dalish clan."

It rumbled slightly. "I have but one desire, to solve a matter very dire: as I slept one early morn, a thief did come and steal an acorn." The leaves shook. "All I have is my being, my seed. Without it I am alone indeed. I cannot go and seek it out; yet I shall die if left without."

"What you ask is of little cost," she reached into her belt pouch. "Is this the acorn you lost?"

The tendrils took it from her almost reverently. "My joy soars to new heights indeed! I am reunited with my seed!" Another tendril handed her a staff of knotted wood. "This cannot pass without reward; I shall give what little I can afford. Keep this branch of mine with thee, and pass throughout the forest free."

"I must be going on my way, perhaps we shall speak again one day?"

"I wish thee well, my mortal friend. Thou brought my sadness

to an end. May sunlight find you, thy days be long, thy winters kind, and thy roots be strong."

She gave the tree a curtsy, then turned around and blinked. Her companions were all just staring at her. "What?"

Saitada sighed, and started heading back up the path. Lenore caressed the staff. She could feel the power humming within it. She waved goodbye to the tree, and followed her friends.

#

"Yes? What is it you need?" Zathrian raised an eyebrow.

"Just finished walkin a patrol. Ain't sensing any darkspawn around. Might have just been that little band. Advanced scouts, maybe."

"Are you certain you accounted for all of them?"

"Songbird said we got them all, so we did. They don't escape his nose."

"Good. We have enough trouble without darkspawn."

Brosca stretched, then glanced up at Zathrian. "So, I spoke to Lanaya."

Zathrian raised an eyebrow. "And what did she have to say."

"She's got a high opinion of you."

His face became warm. "And I of her. One day she will be keeper after I am gone. She is more than ready."

"Seems to have a good head on her shoulders. She said you've been keeper a very long time."

"That's true." Pride showed in his voice. "Hundreds of years, if you must know. Slowly the Dalish will all know once again the agelessness of the elves. For now, only a few of us have regained that ability." Wariness showed in his eyes. "But I cannot say any more on that. I trust your curiosity is sated?"

Brosca's eyes widened. "Reckon it's gonna have to be." He twitched a shoulder. "She said you lost your family."

Zathrian's voice caught. "I... would rather not speak of it. It is very painful for me, even now after so long. The werewolves were responsible. That is all you need to know, and should adequately explain my hatred of them, no? Let us leave it at that."

"Sorry. Didn't mean ta..." Brosca sighed. "My friends are tough. They'll take care of this Witherfang."

"I hope you are correct."

Brosca was silent for a few minutes, considering. It felt like he was missing something. He shrugged. "Heard a legend once, bout the fall of Arlathan. To flee the humans hunting them, a clan of elves came down to one of the thaigs. Cadash thaig, I think it might have been. Story says that the things wrought by

the magic of the elves and the hammers of the dwarves were some of the greatest marvels ever created. 'Cept it was long enough ago that nobody knows what those marvels were, and that thaig was lost to spawn. Don't suppose you'd know the truth of any of it?"

"I recall stories of a clan that sought sanctuary with the dwarves, but not what fate eventually befell them."

"Well, suppose all that's left is to keep the spawn from taking more. I'm gonna walk another patrol." He walked away, lost in thought. There was something else here, he just couldn't see it.

#

"We are invaded! Intruders have deceived their way into the forest's heart! Fall back to the ruins! Protect the Lady!"

They surged forward, attacking the wolves. Saitada was about to yell to press the attack when a giant white wolf landed in their midst. Alistair jumped backwards in surprise, and the werewolf he'd been about to skewer scrambled backwards and ran. The wolf snarled, then ran off after the others.

"That beast 'tis most likely Witherfang," Morrigan said.

"Yeah. Got that. Alistair, you alright?" Saitada asked.

"Just startled."

"Saitada?"

"Yes, Lenore?"

"He said 'protect the Lady'. What lady?"

Saitada blinked, then looked back in the direction the wolves had fled. "Brehan, Morrigan, any thoughts?"

Both of them shook their heads. "Maybe an apostate hiding with them?" Brehan offered.

"Let's press on."

They started forward again. Brehan's eyes widened as he walked a bit ahead. "These ruins are elvish. They must be..." he shook his head and looked back at them. "A thousand years old, at least. If not more." He turned back. "It's possible there could be still active wards."

"Lenore, Morrigan, Wynne, keep an eye out."

48. Chapter 48

"Mamae? Mamae na mara san..."

Saitada watched Brehan cautiously approach the ghostly form of the child. He tried speaking to it in elvish.

"Mamae! Mamae! Mamae!" The figure's face showed stark terror, and it ran off screaming. "Mamae! Mamae, se vara sal!"

"I think I got the gist of that," Lenore said. "Mommy, I'm lost."

"I can't find you," Brehan finished. He shook its head. "Follow?" he asked Saitada.

Saitada nodded. "There has to be another way past that door."

#

"Getting dark soon," Brosca muttered.

"Shale and I will stand the first watch," Sten said.

Brosca nodded at him. He started to turn around. Then he narrowed his eyes. He scanned the camp. After a moment, he tilted his head to one side. "Sten?"

"Yes?"

"Do you see that keeper fellow anywhere?"

Sten glanced down at him, and then looked around the camp.
"I do not."

"That concerns me a bit."

"Saitada's orders were to guard the camp."

"I know." Brosca looked up. "Watches of three. You want the assassin or the bard?"

Sten sighed. "The bard."

"I'll get her."

#

Jerath was about to leave the room when something caught his eye. An elaborately carved gemstone lay partially concealed by the dusty remnants of an old tome. He bent, and took a closer look. Inside appeared to be a pool of blood, rippling slowly as the gem vibrated. He reached down to pick it up.

Memories seemed to flood into him. He saw a city rising amidst a forest, delicately spiraling upwards until the tops of both tree and tower disappeared into the very clouds. An army was on the march, dressed in armor of burnished coppery metal. A griffin took wing from the balcony on one of

the towers. And then the memory seemed to recoil from him in fear. New images flooded his mind, imprisonment. Loneliness. An emptiness more profound than when he'd woken without the rage. Who are you? What are you? He directed his thoughts at the presence.

There was a sense of bewilderment, and then a trembling sort of hope as it seemed to reach back out towards him. Real. Another sensation, time, rushing through his mind like a dragon. Time in which to go mad, then sane, then mad again, sleeping between. A mage, in glittering silver armor, seen through the fog of a span of time too great for him to fully comprehend. What is this place? What happened here?

Images slowly formed in response to the question. Serenity. Immortal elves in endless sleep, tribute offered to the gods. Violence. War. Memories jumbled together. He thought a few of them might be his own. War with humans?

Humans had come before. They had built these halls. War. Other humans. More war. The elves and humans who had built the halls laying slaughtered in the ruins. How did you end up in this gem?

Elves and humans screaming, attempting to flee. Terror. Terror of something blurred and lost to the ages. Or perhaps terror of something he simply lacked the foundation to comprehend. Fleeing into the life gem, leaving the body behind. Certainty that someone would come. Rescue. A river of time. A sense of himself touching the gem. Now. You were once a mage?

Images of the elf in silver armor. Mage and warrior. Dirth'ena enaslin. Knowledge that led to victory. Arcane warrior. What is an arcane warrior exactly?

Elven mages, channeling spells into strength. Spell in one hand, sword in the other. An offer. Knowledge. Teach. An offer, a plea. Oblivion. How would I give you the release you seek?

Uncertainty. A stone altar. The gem laid upon the altar. The gem vibrating and exploding. A yearning for death, more keen than any blade. Hopeless. Hope. Hopeless. Hope. Please. Yes, I will try to help you.

Desperation. Searching. Trying to remember where to find the altar. Can't remember. So long ago. Walls new, white and clean. A library. Students gathered around a teacher. The teacher standing behind the altar. I see it.

Emotion. Tremulous hope. The teacher an elf in silver armor. The student an elf in splint mail, eyes turning yellow. A question. Yes, give me your memories.

Knowledge. A flood of images, lessons. Sword in hand, sparing, back and forth. Spells. Overwhelming, sweet pain. Falling into bed after a satisfying bout. Promise. Release. Farewell.

He set the artifact on the stone altar.

Joy. Relief. Oblivion.

He shook his head and blinked. A glance over his shoulder showed Lenore still peering at a fresco, while Saitada talked to Brehan about which direction to go. He looked down at the broken gem laying on the altar. Only seconds had passed, and nobody seemed to have noticed.

He glanced back at Saitada. Maybe he wouldn't mention it to her. She was worried enough already. And maybe he should stop hanging around Lenore. She was definitely a bad influence.

#

Lenore watched in rapt fascination as Brehan went through the motions of the ritual. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and felt Cathiel's hand cover it. She sighed.

He took the jug of water over to the altar. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and Alistair's hand caught her chin and firmly closed it again. She sighed.

Brehan knelt, bowing his head in prayer. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and Cathiel shoved a piece of candy into it. She sighed.

He picked up the jug, and took a sip of water. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and Alistair stuck his finger up her nose. She glared, and sighed.

Brehan knelt back at the fountain, and slowly poured the water back into the pool. She opened her mouth to ask a

question, and Cathiel stuck a piece leather strap between her teeth. She spat it out and sighed.

The earthen jug shattered. She opened her mouth to ask a question, and Alistair leaned over and licked her cheek. She elbowed him, and then sighed.

Slowly, the huge metal door swung open. Alistair and Cathiel stood up to rejoin the others. Lenore crossed her arms and pouted for a moment before following.

#

"Viran se lan'aan? Ir annala for ros..." The spirit flowed from one side of the dias to the other. "Nae! Ga rahn s'dael! Ga rahn!"

"Mana. Ir halani," Brehan called out to it.

"Ir emah'la shal! Ir emah'la shal!" The shade wailed, then attacked. Brehan defended himself, knocking it away with the maul. It wailed again, and dissolved.

"I'm not sure trying to talk to them is doing any good," Lenore said.

"Says the woman who got into a rhyming contest with a tree," Brehan said.

"What did it say?"

Brehan shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure. I think it asked

us how we found this place, that it had been lost for centuries. And then it accused us of..." He sighed as Lenore pushed aside the lid of the sarcophagus to look inside. "Desecrating its grave what are you doing?"

"Looking. Who buries their dead under a tree?"

He closed the lid. "The Dalish."

"Oh."

"Brehan?" Alistair called out. "Come take a look at this."

Brehan gave Lenore a look, and then walked over to where Alistair was standing. A set of elven armor stood on a rack. It was metal, but it looked almost as though it had been... grown. It actually smelled of fresh grass. He caressed it, and it felt warm to his touch. Alistair grinned at him. "Looks made for you."

"The straps are a loss, but, yes," Brehan said. He put the armor into his pack.

#

"Does anyone else smell..." Jerath started to say.

The dragon landed on the platform in front of them. She spread her wings and hissed before sending a swath of fire their way. They dodged in various directions.

"Dragon shit?" Saitada asked. She and Alistair began moving

towards the dragon, shields ready, keeping it focused on them as the others started to circle behind. Cathiel moved behind them, firing arrows.

Jerath started to move in, and the dragon leapt away. It opened its mouth to breath fire at the younger elf, and Brehan jumped down from his elevated position, slamming the maul into the top of the dragon's head. There was a rather sickening crack, and the dragon went limp.

The rest of the party stared at Brehan. He blinked, and then smiled. "I like this hammer."

"Did... Brehan just make himself useful in a fight?" Lenore asked.

"You mean as something other than bait?" Alistair asked.

Saitada shook her head. She wasn't sure what the string of elvish meant, but she did recognize the few dwarven words he mixed in. "Brehan, I'm pretty sure even Alistair would find that anatomically impossible."

#

Brosca shook the sleep out of his head when Sten woke him. He elbowed Zevran, and the elf made a rude gesture before getting up. Sten was already shaking Oghren awake. "Any sign of that keeper fellow?" Brosca asked him quietly.

"None," Sten replied.

"Any trouble?"

"Strange as it seems, no."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. This many wounded... why ain't the wolves attacking?" He shook his head. "Maybe the others have them too busy elsewhere."

"They do display a skill for attracting trouble."

Brosca smirked and nodded. "Rest. Be ready to head out after the others at first light."

#

Brehan barely had time to call a warning before two arrows caught him in the chest, and he fell. He saw Alistair move in front of him, and heard more arrows clang off Alistair's shield and breastplate. Saitada and Jerath moved to close as Wynne knelt next to him.

The door on the other side of the corridor broke open, and more of the undead began to pour through. "Saitada," Alistair yelled.

"I got this," Jerath said to her, and she turned back to help Alistair protect the others.

Cathiel focused her bow on the corpses coming down the corridor from a room at the end, aided by the spells of Morrigan. Lenore said a few very unlady-like words as she turned her spells to the bodies starting to rise behind them.

Cathiel was nearly out of arrows by the time the last one fell. She sighed, and began retrieving the ones she could. "Alistair, hold him," Wynne ordered. Alistair immediately knelt and leaned forward, pinning Brehan to the ground. Wynne put her hands on either side of one of the arrows. Her hands glowed with white energy, and she nodded to Lenore. Lenore inhaled, and pulled out the arrow.

Brehan cursed in elvish. The two mages repeated the process with the second arrow. Saitada smiled down at the man. "We have got to get you heavier armor."

"Or Alistair could stand in front of me." Brehan accepted Alistair's hand up.

"Or you could learn to dodge," Cathiel said, poking him with one of her arrows. "And to think, only minutes ago you were looking so heroic."

Saitada gave him a concerned look, and then turned to see the mages. Lenore was offering Wynne a lyrium potion. "Lenore, Wynne, do we need to head back?"

"Perhaps it would be..."

"Might not be an option," Jerath's voice said.

"Why not?" Brehan asked, and then took a step backwards. "By the Dread Wolf..."

"Interesting choice of curses," Jerath said, looking back at him

through eyes that had turned yellow. He turned to look at Saitada. "If you need to head back, you'll have to leave me behind."

"Not an option." She sighed. "How long?"

"Morning would be my guess."

Saitada shook her head. "You weren't going to tell us."

"We are already doing everything we can to fix the problem. I didn't want you to worry."

"And now?" she asked, glaring at him.

He shrugged. "Faster than I thought. I think it might be the combat. Too great a chance..." he exhaled.

"Jerath?"

"Now I can fucking smell Brehan's blood," he said, shaking his head. "I'll take point." He walked off.

"Maker..." Alistair said softly.

Wynne's voice trembled. "Saitada, if he changes..."

"Morrigan, that spell you have that holds people in place?"

"I will keep it ready," Morrigan said.

Brehan touched the blood on his armor. "Danyla didn't attack,"

he said contemplatively.

"Danyla didn't attack Jerath," Saitada said. "He was already infected."

"Fenedhis."

#

Saitada sheathed her sword and started to breathe a sigh of relief, and then more of the werewolves appeared out of nowhere. One raked its claws across Lenore's stomach. The mage cried out. Alistair shoved her out of the way of a second blow, and the werewolf landed on top of him. It bore him to the ground, its claws raking on his armor as it sought purchase.

Jerath grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and literally threw it back against the wall, then closed. Alistair rolled back to his feet, drawing his blade just as another of the wolves came at him. He swung, keeping it at bay as Wynne and Morrigan pulled Lenore out from under the combatants.

Brehan used the maul to trip the werewolf charging Saitada. As it fell, Saitada bashed it across the face with her shield. Brehan turned and brought the hammer down on the wolf's back, crushing it to the floor. Cathiel caught the werewolf Alistair was dueling with an arrow to the eye.

Saitada glanced to the last wolf just in time to see Jerath slam its head against the floor with enough force to shatter its

skull. She blinked. He hadn't drawn his weapons. "Jerath?"

He stood, and shook his head. "I'm alright."

Saitada nodded, and turned to where Wynne was helping Lenore back to her feet. "Lenore?"

"I liked these robes," Lenore muttered. She picked up her staff.

Cathiel shook her head at the mage, and then went to disarm the traps. Saitada kept her blade in hand. She glanced at her companions. "Brehan, take rear guard. Alistair, you and I at the front. You stick with Cathiel, she might need your shield if there are more traps. Lenore, I need you to..."

"If it's all the same, Saitada," Lenore said, looking over at her. "I think I'll be taking point with Jerath now." She stepped around Alistair and walked over to where Jerath was standing. Jerath gave her a respectful nod, then the two of them starting walking.

Alistair watched them, and then turned to look at Cathiel worriedly. Saitada raised an eyebrow at the archer. "I don't feel any different," Cathiel said. "I was injured the same time Jerath was. If I was infected, I'd be showing signs by now, right? They both knew right away."

Saitada nodded. "Wynne, Morrigan, stay between the rest of us." She considered a moment. "Morrigan, if you know anything, have anything to add..."

"I can make suppositions, but I fear 'tis conjecture only." She looked in the direction the other two had gone. She sounded worried. "In a way, it seems a slow process of becoming a rage abomination."

"That is so not comforting," Alistair said.

"'twas not intended to be."

"This Witherfang?"

"If it 'tis the source of the curse, then yes, it could be used to halt the infection." Morrigan considered, and then reluctantly continued. "However, it may not have an effect on those that have already completed the transformation."

"So we are on a deadline. Let's move."

#

The werewolves moved towards them. Jerath drew his weapons, sword in one hand, axe in the other. Lenore readied her staff. The beasts sniffed, then started move around them. Beside her, Lenore heard Jerath actually snarl, as he stepped to block their path. The beast snarled back.

Her blood burned. Their companions were coming up the corridor. She saw the heads of the werewolves start to come up. Lenore drew on her magic and felt her blood burn hotter. Pain seared her mind. She howled, and sent the spell forth. The resulting inferno swirled down the corridor, catching the

approaching wolves in a whirlwind of flame. She held the spell, closing her eyes as the pain in her blood ebbed and the fire grew. She could smell the burning hair. And then Jerath slammed her against the wall. "Pull it back," his voice was at her ear. "Pull it back. Lenore, you will bring the whole place down. Pull it back."

She focused on his voice, and let the spell die. The fire returned to her blood, and she opened her eyes again. A few places on the corridor walls still glowed red from residual heat. Bones, cracked and blackened from the heat, lay strewn around. Ash trickled through the air.

Her eyes met his. "That felt better than it should have."

"It does."

She took a breath. Then another. "I can't use fire. Too risky. Feels too..." Her eyes widened as she started to look back towards the others. Maker, she really could smell the blood. She forced herself to look ahead, and went through a mental exercise to calm herself. "Okay. I think I'm okay."

He let her go. "You sure."

"I'm sure." She tilted her head at him. His eyes were all the way yellow. "How are you controlling the urge not to kill all our friends?"

He smiled. "Practice."

Despite the pain she was in, she laughed.

#

Cathiel narrowed her eyes. She wasn't entirely sure how many of the werewolves had been reduced to ash and char. Lenore and Jerath were almost to the other end of the corridor. She glanced at Saitada, and saw the dwarven woman frowning at the corpses. Her thoughts went all the way back to Lothering, to when she'd challenged Saitada for the right to lead their group. At this moment, she was unbelievably grateful that the other woman had won that conflict.

Lenore was easily one of the most powerful mages Cathiel had ever heard of, let alone seen. With a blade in his hand, Jerath was the closest thing she knew to an unstoppable force. If either actually lost control, turned on them... She glanced back at Saitada again, and saw in their leader's eyes that she was doing the math. How long did they dare wait? The only chance they had would be if they acted when their infected friends were still capable of cooperating in their own executions.

Wynne's face was bleak. Morrigan's knuckles were white on her staff, though her face remained composed. Neither Alistair nor Brehan had sheathed their weapons since they'd seen Jerath beat a werewolf to death with his bare hands. She glanced down at her nocked arrow, ready to draw and loose with barely a thought.

Maker. She'd seen Jerath deliver mercy kills. Seen Lenore offer her little vials. That's what it would be, right? Mercy.

#

"Time to get moving," Brosca said as he woke Sten.

Sten picked up his breastplate and began buckling the straps around himself. "The night was peaceful, then?"

"Kinda creepy, really." Brosca shook his head. "You know, I think I sorta hate the woods."

#

Saitada stepped into the next room. Jerath and Lenore stood between them and the werewolves. A giant among the wolves, nearly eight feet in height stood on a dais. The other wolves ranged behind him, but he held up a hand to forestall them. "Stop! Brothers and sisters, be at ease! We do not wish any more of our people hurt. I ask you this now, outsider: are you willing to parley?"

"Like you parleyed with the Dalish?" Fury filled Brehan's voice.

"Hrrr, that was different." The giant gray werewolf lowered his head, and held out his hands. "The Lady believes that the Dalish have not told you everything, so she has asked that you be brought to her. She means you no harm, provided your willingness to parley in peace is an honest one."

"Forget it. I'm not about to trust any of you," Saitada said. Not

while the lives of Jerath and Lenore were at stake.

"Wait!" Wynne said. "Surely we can listen to what they have to say?"

"And what would be the point, you old fool?" Morrigan practically spat the words. "We have already slaughtered our way through them, unless you've forgotten."

"Do we truly lose so much just by listening to their words? Must we slaughter our way past everything?"

Saitada looked at the two standing between them and the other werewolves. Other werewolves... she couldn't think of it that way. "Wynne... we can't risk it."

The gray wolf's voice actually sounded sorrowful. "Then it seems we are..."

"We'll parley." Lenore straightened. She glanced at Jerath, and he nodded and sheathed his weapons. "We'll parley. Everyone calm down."

The werewolf nodded slowly. "Follow me. But I warn you, if you break your promise and harm her, I will come back from the Fade itself to see you pay."

Saitada glanced at the others. Their faces were as confused as hers. She narrowed her eyes. Then she sheathed her sword.

The woman was clearly a spirit. Her skin was tinged green, and vines grew up her naked body, forming into hands as they reached the ends of her arms. Her hair flowed down her shoulders like spilled ink. And Lenore found a part of herself wanting to crawl into the Lady's lap like a small child.

She glanced at Jerath, and he nodded. He felt it too. She couldn't bring herself to turn and look at their companions. All that was left was to hope that their companions managed to resolve the situation peacefully. Because... oh sweet Maker, because if they tried to hurt the Lady, Lenore wasn't entirely sure she'd be able to let them.

"I bid you welcome, mortal. I am the Lady of the Forest." The Lady's voice was hauntingly beautiful as it echoed through the chamber, sweet as the mother Lenore could barely remember.

"Really?" The disrespect in Brehan's voice made her want to growl. "You seem more like the Lady of the Ruin to me."

"You will not speak to the Lady in this manner!" Swiftrunner started to surge forward.

"Hush, Swiftrunner. Your urge for battle has seen only the death of the very ones you have been trying to save. Is that what you want?"

The brown werewolf knelt before her, a gesture of respect and adoration. "No, my lady. Anything but that."

"Then the time has come to speak with this outsider, to set our rage aside. I apologize on Swiftrunner's behalf. He struggles with his nature."

"As do we all, Lady," Saitada said.

"Truer words were never spoken. But few could claim the same as these creatures: that their very nature is a curse forced upon them. No doubt you have questions, mortal. There are things that Zathrian has not told you." The lady smiled, descending a few paces down the steps.

"Is that so?" Brehan's voice was skeptical. She really could smell his blood. "Such as?"

"It was Zathrian who created the curse that these creatures suffer, the same curse that Zathrian's own people now suffer."

#

Saitada watched the strange woman gently stroke Jerath's hair. For once, the elf didn't pull back or glare at the touch. That alone disturbed her more than the creature's appearance. Lenore was watching with a rapturous expression. Stone.

The woman continued speaking. "Centuries ago, when the Dalish first came to this land, a tribe of humans lived close this forest. They sought to drive the Dalish away. Zathrian was a young man then." Saitada shot Brehan a look. He met her eyes and shook his head, clearly confused. "He had a son and

daughter he loved greatly, and while out hunting the human tribe captured them both."

"Hrrr..." Swiftrunner's voice sounded pained and reluctant. "The humans... tortured the boy, killed him. The girl they raped and left for dead. The Dalish found her, but she learned later she was... with child. She... killed herself."

"So Zathrian cursed them, I take it?" Cathiel asked. Her fingers kept twitching towards her bow.

Swiftrunner looked at her, then nodded slowly. "Zathrian came to this ruin and summoned a terrible spirit, binding it to the body of a great wolf. So Witherfang came to be." He stood. "Witherfang hunted the humans of the tribe. Many were killed, but others were cursed by his blood, becoming twisted and savage creatures..."

"Twisted and savage just as Witherfang himself is," the woman said. "They were driven into the forest. When the human tribe finally left for good, their cursed brethren remained, pitiful and mindless animals."

Swiftrunner gazed at her with enraptured eyes. "Until I found you, my lady. You gave me peace."

She touched his face, a loving, motherly gesture. "I showed Swiftrunner that there was another side to his bestial nature. I soothed his rage, and his humanity emerged. And he brought others to me."

Brehan shook his head. "Why did you ambush the Dalish? For revenge?"

A soft sigh escaped the woman. "In part." A note of anger entered her voice. "We seek to end the curse. The crimes committed against Zathrian's children were grave, but they were committed centuries ago by those who are long dead." She shook her head. "Word was sent to Zathrian every time the landships passed this way, asking him to come, but he has always ignored us. We will no longer be denied."

The low growl from Swiftrunner was filled with frustration. "We spread the curse to his people. So he must end the curse to save them."

"Please, mortal..." The woman held out a beseeching hand. "You must go to him. Bring him here. If he sees these creatures, hears their plight... surely he will agree to end the curse."

Saitada sighed. "Why would Zathrian agree to come here alone?"

"If Zathrian comes, I shall summon Witherfang. I possess that power. I also have the power to ensure Witherfang is never found. Tell Zathrian this. If he does not come, if he does not break the curse, he will never find Witherfang, and he will never cure his people."

Saitada narrowed her eyes. "And if I don't do as you bid, my people suffer the same fate." She looked from Lenore to

Jerath.

"They may remain here. I can ease their suffering, sooth their pain. They will not be harmed." The woman smiled at Lenore. "They will not be harmed by me or mine even if you do refuse this task."

"Saitada?" Lenore said softly.

"Yes Lenore?"

"She's Witherfang."

"So if we..."

"I won't let you. Neither will Jerath." The mage blinked tears out of her eyes. "Saitada, you know what the right thing to do is."

Saitada nodded. She did. "Very well. I will go to Zathrian and tell him this."

#

Cathiel put a hand to her bow when she saw the keeper standing at the entrance to the ruins. Either he'd followed them, or he'd known exactly where to find them all along. She glanced at Saitada, and noted the dwarven woman looked absolutely furious. Clearly, their leader had come to the same conclusion.

"Ah. And here you are already," Zathrian said.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here?" Saitada asked, walking towards him.

Zathrian narrowed his eyes. "Did you? Aren't you the intuitive one."

"How did you get here?" Brehan asked. "Wouldn't the forest keep you out?"

"I am a keeper, with access to the magic of the ancients. I was never barred from this place."

Morrigan chuckled. "He wishes to see if we did his work for him. Is that not why you are here now, sorcerer?"

"Do not call me that, witch." Despite having called Morrigan that dozens of times, Cathiel found herself angry on the other woman's behalf. Zathrian glared. "I am keeper of this clan, and have done what I must. Did you acquire the heart?"

"We need to talk, Hahren," Brehan said.

"So you wish to play games, da'len?" Zathrian shook his head. "I can sense you do not have it. Why are you leaving the ruin?"

"To fetch you, and bring you back to the Lady of the Forest," Saitada said.

"Oh? Is that what the spirit calls herself now?"

"You knew?" Brehan's eyes widened. "You knew?" He started

to step forward, and Alistair grabbed his shoulder. "Ma banal las halamshir var vhen." He shook his head. "Is'ma tel'him."

"Ir abelas, ma suledin..."

"Mana. Hahren, ma ghilana elvhen din'an. Halam sahlin."

"Da'len..."

"Mana. Ma halam. Ma ghilan'him banal'vhen. Ar'din nuvenin na'din. Var halani, sela ar tu na'lin emma mi."

"Ma emma harel, da'len. Dirthara-ma."

"Fen'harel tu ven, era'lin."

"Not that watching Brehan turn you into a greasy smear wouldn't be entertaining," Saitada said. "But the lady is waiting."

"And what does she want with me, if I might inquire?"

"What do you think she wants?" Brehan practically spat.

Zathrian shrugged, and eyed Brehan with disgust. "To survive, I suspect. That is the common nature amongst all such creatures, the will do survive." He shook his head. "You do understand that..."

"That she is Witherfang?" Brehan narrowed his eyes. "Tel garas solasan, harrellan."

"She is the powerful spirit of this ancient forest that I summoned long ago and bound into the body of the wolf." Zathrian shook his head. "Her nature is that of the forest itself. Beautiful and terrible, serene and savage, maiden and beast. She is the Lady and Witherfang both, two sides of a single being. The curse came first from her. Those she afflicted with it mirrored her own nature, becoming savage beast as well as human."

"The curse came first from you," Brehan said.

Zathrian clenched his fists and actually took a step towards Brehan. "They attacked my clan and they were the same savages that they have ever been. They deserve to be wiped out and not defended." He inhaled, and his face softened. "Come, da'len. I can force the spirit into Witherfang's form. He may then be slain and the heart taken. Help me save our people."

Brehan's smile was cold. "The werewolves have regained their minds."

"Even so, they are still the same worthless creatures that their ancestors were. They deserve nothing more than the misery they possess." Zathrian shook his head. "This is not your battle, Grey Warden. Let us just take the heart and be done with it."

"I am making this my fight." Brehan said. Cathiel found herself filled with a new respect for the man. If she understood Dalish culture at all, he'd just more or less threatened a grand cleric.

"If you do not help me get the heart, then my hunters are not cured and you will get no assistance against the darkspawn."

"Do you still have so much hatred after all this time?"

"You were not there. You did not see what... what they did to my son. To my daughter. And so many others." He shook his head. "You are Dalish. You know how we must struggle to be safe, how we must fight for justice. I could not let their crimes go unanswered!"

"So your answer is to let them suffer forever?"

"Tell me, if you held your own daughter's lifeless body in your arms would you not also have sworn an eternity of pain on those who did such to her?"

"Yes. But who is being punished now, Hahren?"

Zathrian's face was furious. "Very well. You wish me go and talk? I will do so. But what if it is only more revenge they wish? Will you safeguard me from harm?"

"I will protect you from them."

"Ma serannas," Zathrian said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

49. Chapter 49

The werewolves shifted and growled as they walked back into the chamber with Zathrian. Cathiel resisted the urge to finger her bowstring, not wanting to provoke any hostilities.

"So here you are, spirit."

"She is the Lady of the Forest. You will address her properly." Swiftrunner started to surge forward, and Brehan stepped between the werewolf and the keeper.

"You've taken a name, spirit?" Zathrian's voice was mocking. "And you've given names to your pets? These..." He looked around, and his eyes narrowed when he saw Jerath and Lenore. "...Beasts who follow you?" Uninfected or not, Cathiel wanted to join the werewolves in growling at him.

"It was they who gave me a name, Zathrian. And the names they take are their own. They follow me because I help them to find who they are."

"Who they are has not changed from whom their ancestors were. Wild savages! Worthless dogs! Their twisted shape only mirrors their monstrous hearts!"

Swiftrunner gazed down at Brehan before turning back to the

lady. "He will not help us, Lady! It is as I warned you! He is not here to talk!"

Zathrian shook his head. "No, I am here to talk, though I see little point in it. We all know where this will lead. Your nature compels it, as does mine."

"It does not have to be that way. There is room in your heart for compassion, Zathrian. Surely your retribution is spent."

"My retribution is eternal, spirit, as is my pain. This is justice, no more."

"Are you certain your pain is the only reason you will not end this curse? Have you told the mortals how it was created?"

"He said he summoned you and bound you to a wolf," Saitada said.

"And so he did. Witherfang and I are bound as one being. But such powerful magic could not be accomplished without Zathrian's own blood." She turned her gaze on Zathrian. "Your people believe you have rediscovered the immortality of their ancestors, Zathrian, but that is not true. So long as the curse exists, so do you."

Zathrian shook his head. "No, that is not how it is!"

"You would betray our people for revenge," Brehan said coldly, but he did not move from his position between Swiftrunner and Zathrian. Cathiel found herself a little bit

worried, and wondered if what Brehan had said to Zathrian obligated him to protect the keeper if the keeper was the one that started hostilities.

"It is not a betrayal. I did what was necessary. I did what was just, and it still is!"

"The curse would not end with Zathrian's death," the Lady said, lifting a hand in a gesture of pacification. "His life, however, relies on its existence. And I believe his death plays a part in its ending."

Swiftrunner snarled. "Then we kill him! We tear him apart now." He started to push forward, and Brehan used the hilt of the maul to shove him backwards.

"For all your powers of speech, you are beasts still," Zathrian said, all but spitting the words. "What would you gain from me? Only I know how the ritual ends, and I will never do it."

Swiftrunner turned and gestured. "You see? We must kill them all."

Next to her, Alistair shifted nervously. She caught his glance. If it came to battle, whose side, exactly would they be on?

Zathrian apparently had thoughts along the same lines. He turned to Saitada. "See? They turn on you as quickly. Do what you have come her to do, Grey Warden, or get out of my way."

Saitada's voice was cold, and harder than the stone of Orzammar. "You will end that curse if I have to force you myself."

Alistair lifted his shield. "We're standing for what's right, here. No matter what." Cathiel smiled at him proudly.

"Then you die with them! All of you will suffer as you deserve!" Zathrian started to intone a spell.

Brehan dropped his maul, turned around, grabbed Zathrian by the front of his robes, and brought his forehead down into the keeper's nose with a rather sickening crunching sound. He followed it with a punch to the stomach.

#

Leliana gestured at the tracks. "This way."

"I cannot help but notice we are not being attacked by werewolves," Zevran said.

"Leliana, you sure?" Brosca asked.

"Brehan left trail signs for me, see?" She pointed.

"No, but I'll take your word for it. Let me know if you see the egghead's tracks."

#

He bent, and picked the keeper up by the front of his robes.

Zathrian started to gesture, and Brehan hauled him off his feet and shook him. "I said I'd protect you from them," Brehan said, eyes narrowed. "No one here will protect you from me."

Zathrian blinked at him, eyes slightly dazed. "No more. I cannot defeat you."

Swiftrunner growled behind him. "Finish it. Kill him now."

"No, Swiftrunner. We will not kill him." Brehan felt the Lady's hand on his shoulder. Her voice was gentle. "If there is no room in our hearts for mercy, how may we expect there to be room in his."

Brehan lowered the keeper to the ground, and then held him to prevent him from falling. Zathrian shook his head. "I cannot do as you ask, spirit. I am too old... to know mercy. All I see are the faces of my children, my people. I... I cannot do it."

"Will you really let your clan die?" Brehan asked him. "For this?"

Zathrian looked at him. "Perhaps I have... lived too long. This hatred in me is like an ancient, gnarled root... It has consumed my soul." He clutched Brehan's arm to keep from falling as he turned to look at the spirit. "What of you, spirit? You are bound to the curse just as I am. Do you not fear your end?"

"You are my maker, Zathrian. You gave me form and consciousness where none existed. I have known pain and love, hope and fear, all the joy that is life. Yet of all things I

desire no more than an end. I beg you, maker... put an end to me." She knelt. "We beg you... show mercy." Around them, the werewolves began to kneel as well.

Zathrian pushed Brehan away, and fell to his own knees in front of the Lady. "You shame me, spirit. I am... an old man, alive long past his time."

"Then you will do it? You will end the curse?"

"Yes. I think it is time. Let us... put an end to it all." He inhaled, then looked at Brehan. "Help me to the altar, da'len."

Brehan nodded, and caught his arm. To his surprise, Swiftrunner immediately came to Zathrian's other side to offer assistance. Together they carried the keeper to the altar.

#

Saitada and the others gathered to watch. The faces of Morrigan and Lenore were enraptured, and the fact that both now had yellow eyes lent a rather uncanny affect to their shared expressions.

Alistair had his arms around Cathiel, and Saitada saw tears falling down the young woman's cheeks. Wynne's eyes were wet as well.

Both the Lady of the Forest and Zathrian vanished in the emerald light. It seemed to spread out, blinding. When she managed to blink her eyes clear, men stood where there had

once been werewolves.

"It's... over." The man that stood where Swiftrunner had been sounded almost ready to burst into tears. "She's gone, and... we're human. I can scarcely believe it."

"What will you do now?" Brehan asked him.

"We will leave the forest, I suppose. Find other humans, see what's out there for us. It should be quite interesting, don't you think?" He kept looking down at his hands, turning them forward and backward.

"Head north. Or west, to Redcliffe. Perhaps we will meet again one day."

Swiftrunner nodded. Then he shook his head. "I never got your name."

"Brehan."

He nodded. "Brehan. It mean anything in Dalish?"

"Raven."

"How do you say wolf, in Dalish?"

"Fen."

He looked up at Brehan. "Thank you. We... we'll never forget you." The former werewolves left the chamber.

Saitada turned to look at Lenore. Her eyes were still yellow, but she appeared less tense, and she looked sad. She caught Saitada looking, and managed a smile. "Alright?" Saitada asked.

"Yes. It..." She sighed. "It hurts a bit less than hell, now, and it's fading."

"Jerath?"

"Could do with a rare steak."

"Cathiel, shoot him."

#

Brosca started into the ruins, his mace out and ready, when he saw humans start streaming out and leaving. He blinked, then glanced back at the others. Shale shrugged.

A moment later he saw their companions. They looked... well, maybe a bit worse for wear. Lenore's robes were ripped across the front, almost to the point of indecency. There was blood. Something had clawed his girl. She saw him and gave him a cheerful wave. "Oh, are you coming to rescue us?"

"Yep. Big damn heroes, we are," he said, striding forward to meet them. "I reckon we're a few minutes late?"

Saitada nodded. "Any trouble back at camp?"

"No. But the keeper fellow took off. I think he's up to some..."

"He's dead." Saitada sighed. "Let's go see if it worked for the Dalish."

"If what..." He blinked. Lenore's eyes were yellow. "Um..."

Lenore ran her fingers through his hair. "I'll tell you on the way."

#

"It is done," Lanaya said as they entered the camp. Her eyes were red, as though she were fighting back tears. "The essence of the wolf's heart has banished all traces of cursed blood from the hunters." Her voice was strong but sad. "It is too bad that Zathrian had to die. I..." She swallowed. "I felt it, when he departed. I think he was ready to go."

Brehan dropped his voice low so as not to be overheard. "Did you know about his connection to the curse?"

Her face grew troubled. "I suspected, but... Zathrian did not like to talk about that." She shook her head, and wrapped her arms around herself. "Nonetheless, the curse is over, and no one else will be subjected to it.

"He was a hero in the end, Lanaya," Brehan said.

A tear escaped her eye. "It will be difficult to fill Zathrian's shoes. He was our keeper for many centuries and he will be sorely missed." She raised her head, drew her shoulders back, and took a deep breath. "But I am keeper now. As

promised, allow me to swear by the name of Mythal, She Who Watches, that we are indebted to you. Call and we shall come, with great speed and purpose, and we shall strike at your foes. This I swear."

"Ir abelas, lethallin."

"Ma serranas."

"How long before your people are ready?"

She glanced at where the hunters were. They looked better, but it was clear they were still weakened. "It will be some time. The curse leaves the hunters slowly, and they must regain their strength before they are ready to fight." She inhaled. "It has been a long time since the Dalish marched to war... but I trust that, in the end, we shall make a difference for you."

"I have no doubt. We will rest a day, and then go to Denerim. When you are ready, head to Redcliffe. Our forces gather there."

#

"You have returned. Is there..." Athras looked at him hopefully. "Any chance you have news of Danyla?"

"She was a werewolf, just as you suspected."

"So I was right..." He shook his head. "But what became of her?"

"She died, Athras." Jerath said. He handed the man the scarf. "But not before she sent her love."

He took the scarf, and pressed it to his lips. "She told you that? Yes... that is what she would do. Then... it is over. I should be thankful, I think. At least she is at peace now. You have been most kind, my friend." He offered Jerath something. "Here, take this amulet. I hope it is worth something to you as a reward."

Jerath closed Athras's fingers back over the amulet, and shook his head. "I am sorry, Athras." He couldn't take a reward from a man whose wife he'd killed.

Athras looked at him, and then nodded. "Oh. I... Oh. I should go and make arrangements. I must mourn my wife as is proper. Dareth shiral - fare you well."

He walked away. The keeper gestured to him as he passed her wagon. Jerath shrugged and approached. "That's a fine thing you did for Athras," she said. "He would have worried forever had you not put his mind at ease." She reached to put a hand on his shoulder, and he pulled back. She sighed. "I have a potion. It seems to be easing the suffering of the hunters."

"I'm fine."

"Your friend, the shem mage, actually hugged me after I gave her some."

"She does that. I'm fine."

She frowned, and started to turn away, then turned back. "If I had given it to the shem mage, and asked her to give it to you, would you have taken it?"

"I trust her."

"I see." She looked as if she wanted to say something. "Did you try to come to the Dalish?"

He laughed. She looked taken aback, almost affronted. "No. I don't run." He shook his head, and went to find his friends.

#

Varathorn smiled at Brehan warmly. "It is good to see you again. Have you need of something?"

"I found some ironbark for you."

Varathorn's eyes widened as Brehan showed him the travois they'd brought back. "Truly? Let me see. Yes... that is indeed ironbark, and a substantial quantity of it as well. Well done!" He clapped Brehan on the shoulder. "An agreement is an agreement, and I will craft something from this wood for you. What would you like? A bow? Or perhaps a breastplate."

"Neither. I'm sure your clan needs it more than I do."

"That is very generous of you. Ma serannas. I see you have not lost your Dalish roots in the time you have spent with the

humans." Varathorn shook his head. "I will not allow your generosity to go without at least some reward."

"As it happens, I found some armor in the ruins. It could do with a bit of repair."

"Show me."

Brehan followed him back to the wagon, and took the armor out of his pack. Varathorn's eyes widened. "By the creators... I've not seen... da'len, what you've found here... this might actually have been made in Arlathan."

He blinked. "We found it in those ruins."

Varathorn caressed the breastplate. "I can repair it, but it will take me a bit of time. I can bring it with me, and have it ready when we meet in Redcliffe."

Brehan considered. "How long would you like to study it?"

"I..." Varathorn looked at him, and then sighed. "Years," he answered honestly.

"I seem to do well enough hiding behind the humans when the arrows start flying. Just remember me the first time you manage to duplicate it."

"June enansal, da'len."

#

Cathiel and Alistair almost had to cajole Wynne into going to look for the elven healer. Brehan was busy talking to the craftsman, but a young couple named Cammen and Gheyne had eagerly volunteered to guide them through the woods. She was fairly confident their motives had a lot more to do with the opportunity to steal a few moments alone than it did generosity.

She shook her head at them fondly. "Ah, young love."

"You say that as though you and Alistair do not behave in exactly the same way," Wynne said, shaking her head in mock admonishment.

Alistair looked affronted. "We don't coo."

"You absolutely coo."

"Do not."

"Not only to you coo, I have personally witnessed both of you twitter."

"You are lying and evil," Alistair said.

Wynne smiled. "I think you make her very happy."

He gave her a suspicious look. "Not this again. I'm ready this time."

"I just wanted to say that this was something good, for both of you. Being a Grey Warden isn't easy. I'm glad you found each

other."

Wariness spread across his features. "Oh, yes, I bet you are, indeed."

"Cherish this. It may not last."

He actually started to duck behind his shield. Cathiel giggled. "And?"

Wynne shrugged. "That's all I had to say?"

"Really?" He shook his head, confused. "No pinching my cheeks? No making me blush?"

"Of course not. I like you, Alistair. You deserve to be happy."

Cathiel grinned as Alistair gave Wynne a disappointed look. "Not even pinching my cheeks a little?"

"Come here," Cathiel said. "I'll pinch your cheeks."

Wynne's face became completely innocent. "Which ones?"

#

Lenore glanced over at one corner of the Dalish camp. Morrigan sat, leaning against a log. Jerath lay on the ground, his head resting in her lap as the two talked. Morrigan was actually smiling, laughing warmly at something Jerath had said. Brehan and Leliana were on the other side of the fire, positioned similarly. Lenore began walking in their direction.

"You are very beautiful Morrigan," Leliana was saying.

"Tell me something I do not know." Morrigan's voice held a note of laughter.

Leliana sighed. "But you always dress in such rags. It suits you I suppose. A little tear here, a little rip there to show some skin. I understand."

"You understand I lived in a forest, I hope?"

"Maybe we could get you in a nice dress one day. Silk. No, maybe velvet. Velvet is heavier, better to guard against the cold in Ferelden. Dark red velvet, yes. With gold embroidery. It should be cut low in the front of course, we don't want to hide your features."

"Stop looking at my breasts like that." Morrigan put an arm over her chest. "'Tis most disturbing!" Both Brehan and Jerath laughed.

"You don't think so? And if it's cut low in the front we must put your hair up to show off that lovely neck."

Morrigan shook her head. "You are insane. I would sooner let Alistair dress me."

"It'll be fun, I promise! We'll get some shoes too! Ah, shoes! We could go shopping together!"

"She needs earrings too," Lenore said. "Drops of ruby, maybe?"

"Stop helping her," Morrigan said. The glare held no real malice. Lenore suspected that Morrigan might actually be enjoying herself.

Lenore sat by the fire. "We could dress Jerath to match, he'd look nice in dark red."

"He would, wouldn't he?" Leliana smiled.

"You and Brehan need green though."

"Jerath, what scares you more? Facing the archdemon, or letting these two dress us?" Brehan asked.

"I'd have to think on it," Jerath replied.

Leliana gave Lenore a considering look. "For you, I think blue, and sapphires. Your hair is so pale it's almost silver. How long is it, when it's down?"

"Almost to my waist now."

"We'd put a net of gold over it, and let it hang loose, draping over your shoulders. And a simple gold chain, holding a sapphire teardrop in the center of your forehead. I'd give Morrigan a heavier necklace, her features are dramatic enough to pull it off."

Morrigan gave Lenore a considering look. "A small amount of her hair, braided to make a circlet, woven with gold and what am I saying..." Lenore and Leliana both laughed. "Can we discuss some other matter?"

Lenore shrugged, and glanced at Jerath. "You know, now that my blood doesn't feel like molten lava, I have to admit it was sort of an interesting experience."

Jerath turned his head to look at her. "I suppose without the pain and the urge to take bites out of everyone, it could be called that."

"It is disconcerting to have such a clear understanding of why almost everything we encounter tries to eat Brehan."

"I wonder if it's just him, or if it's a Dalish thing."

"Ma serannas. Emma shem'nan, fen'len."

"I think he's threatening me again," Jerath looked up at Morrigan. "He's threatening me again, isn't he?"

"Can you really blame them, vhenan?" Leliana bent and kissed him. "You do taste really good."

#

Wynne stopped dead in her tracks. "Aneirin...?"

The elven man blinked at her. "Wait, I... I remember your face... but younger, more impulsive, stern... Wynne?"

"I thought they had killed you." Wynne said, sounding for a moment like a lost little girl.

He shook his head. "They very nearly did. The templars found

me while I was searching for the Dalish... they ran me through and left me for dead."

"I brought this on you. Oh, I was a dreadful mentor, harsh and impatient... I am sorry for the way I treated you." Alistair and Cathiel exchanged disbelieving looks as Wynne spoke.

Aneirin smiled and shook his head. "I have put that behind me and you should too. I didn't fit in with the templars and your Chantry... my path lay elsewhere."

She held out a beseeching hand. "Irving is a reasonable man. He will find some way for you to return. The Circle needs new blood. It needs to change."

Aneirin took the hand, but shook his head. "I have fond memories of Irving. He was always kind to me. I will consider your proposal and perhaps I will speak with Irving. However, I promise nothing."

Alistair and Cathiel made themselves comfortable while Aneirin and Wynne chatted. Nearby, Cammen and Ghenya cooed and twittered happily. Almost an hour had passed before Aneirin offered Wynne a hand getting to her feet. "It is getting late, and I'm sure you have much to do."

"It was lovely to meet you, Anierin," Cathiel said.

He gave them a small bow. "Likewise." He turned to Wynne with a smile. "My years in the Circle were not a complete waste. I learned more than I let on. You did teach me,

Wynne, even if you didn't know it." He offered her something. "Look at this. It is the hardened sap of a tree native to this forest. It has been something of a lucky charm for me, and now I want you to have it."

"I am grateful. May your gods smile on you, Aneirin."

"And on you."

#

"And we are out of the trees. This is a glorious day," Brosca said, spreading his arms up towards the sky.

Saitada shook her head and laughed. "I actually liked the trees. Except for the ones that chased us."

"I wish I could have gone back to talk to the Grand Oak before we left." Lenore looked back over her shoulder. "I told Lanaya where to find him. She said she'd visit him from time to time so he didn't get lonely."

"You have the weirdest friends," Alistair said. Lenore gave him a pointed look, and raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I guess I walked into that one, didn't I?"

"Eamon should be to Denerim by now," Cathiel said. "We may beat many of the lords there."

"We'll have time to do some preparations then. I'm going to need your help, Cathiel. You know the people involved a fair bit better than I do," Saitada said.

"Wulff and Bryland will be behind us. There will be a fair number who won't want to, well, upset the applecart. They'll back Loghain just because he's the one currently holding the palace."

"Then we will need to do what we can regarding those."

"Best bet might just be to get them to bow out entirely."

"Alright. Start plotting. Let's go take over a country."

"Didn't we sort of do that once already this month?" Brosca asked.

"Cathiel, shoot him." Saitada sighed. "Alistair, you stick close as well."

"Why? I don't know so many of the nobles."

"But you need to. If we are to present you at the Landsmeet, you'll need to be prepared."

"I don't know if..."

Brosca snorted. "You've got a Ferelden noblewoman and an Orzammar princess to tutor you, yer majesty. What else is needed?"

"A very large stick," Jerath said.

#

"I wish to ask a question of you."

Jerath blinked. "Go ahead."

Morrigan inhaled. "I wish to know your opinion of 'love.'" She said the word as though disgusted by the feel of it in her mouth.

"My opinion?"

She rolled her eyes. "You and I have been intimate, for one." She shifted awkwardly, fiddling with one of the straps on her skirt. "We have been... close... for some time now. You are... impressive... in many ways, and you even protected me from Flemeth without hope of reward." She looked away from him, turning her gaze to some trees off in the distance.

He looked at her, folding his arms and leaning on one of the trees she was using as a tent pole. "And if I do love you?"

"Then we are both fools, and we need to do something immediately." She continued to look away from him. "I have allowed myself to become... too close. This is a weakness, for both of us."

A demon in his head. Walls built to protect those he loved from its wrath. Wolf rage in his mind, agony in his blood. Love all that kept him sane. "Love is not a weakness."

She finally turned towards him, but couldn't quite meet his eyes. "You are not listening to me. Do not be such a fool!"

She shook her head. "This is for your own good. I would not... I am not like other women. I am not worth your distraction. And you... are not worth mine."

He could see the lie in the way her knuckles were white on the strap. "You are worth my distraction."

"I... you are impossible." She shook her head, and wrapped her arms around herself. "Have it your way. But I will tell you truly now: You will regret it in the end."

It hurt worse than the wolf had, realizing she thought she was telling the truth.

#

Brehan woke with a start. He grabbed his pants and slid them on. Leliana blinked up at him sleepily. "What's wrong?"

"I..." Brehan shook his head, then his eyes widened. "Spawn. Wake the others."

He got out of his tent. Alistair and Cathiel looked over at him from where they were standing. "You're awake! You sensed them in your sleep?"

"No I..." He shook his head. "In the dream, it was like the archdemon turned and saw us."

"I think... wait..." Alistair drew his blade. "Did you hear that?"

Even half out of their armor, his companions were formidable.

They met the shrieks as they attacked. Brehan smashed one to the ground, and Zevran finished it off with his daggers. He cast his senses around, and found another on the edge of the camp. He headed that way.

It almost appeared to be cowering as he approached. He shifted his grip on the hammer.

"You... lethallin..."

The maul slipped from his fingers. "Mercy of the gods. It can't be." He shook his head, then shook it again. "It... Tamlen?" Is that you?"

"Don't..." Tamlen scrambled a few paces further away. "Don't come near me. Stay away!" He fled into the bushes.

Brehan followed. "Tamlen, wait!"

#

Saitada cast her senses, then blinked and looked around. "Where is Brehan?"

The others looked around. Zevran nodded to the east. "He started after one that way."

"Jerath, Leliana, go get him. The rest of you spread out a bit make sure we got them all."

#

"Don't... look at me! I am... sick..."

"We can help you, Tamlen. Don't be afraid." Brehan knelt near where his friend was cowering.

Tamlen shook. "No help. No... help for me." His veins appeared nearly black beneath the skin. Brehan could sense the taing pulsing within him. It made him want to vomit. "The song... in my head. It... calls to me. He sings to me! I can't stop it!"

Brehan held out a hand. "I have to try to heal you, Tamlen.

"Too far. You cannot help me."

His eyes blurred with tears. "I wish we'd never found that cave."

"I'm... so sorry, lethallin. Never wanted this..."

"Don't ask me to kill you, Tamlen. Please. I can't do that."

"Then... I must leave you no choice."

Brehan's eyes widened as Tamlen leapt at him with a snarl. He tried to bring his hands up as Tamlen's hands closed around his throat and tightened. Stars appeared in his vision before something pulled Tamlen off him.

Leliana pulled him to his feet. He blinked, and saw Jerath standing between him and the once again cowering Tamlen. "Maker preserve us! Is this... someone you know?" Her voice

was horrified.

"Tamlen," Brehan gasped.

Leliana nodded. "Jerath, if you..."

"No," Brehan called out. "No." He repeated the word in a quieter voice, and then walked to Jerath. He held out his hand, and Jerath handed him the sword. "Ma nuvenin. Ar lasa mala din'an, lethallin."

"Ir abelas." Tamlen said. He bowed his head. "Ma serannas."

He stood there a moment, when it was done, then handed the sword back to Jerath. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry, Brehan," Jerath said.

#

Somehow, Leliana's voice joined to Brehan's made the song even sadder. Lenore snuggled down between Brosca and Zevran. She wondered how Brehan's voice stayed clear even as tears fell from his eyes.

Another friend lost. She put her arm around Zevran as she leaned her head on Brosca's shoulder. Would Brehan sing for them one day? A shiver went down her spine. Who would sing for Brehan, should he be the one to fall?

She'd picked up just enough elvish to understand the gist of the song. From the lyrics, she wondered if it had once been a

happy song, back in the days when elves were immortal and merely slept.

They would all die young, she thought to herself as she looked at her companions. Even if they survived in battle, the taint in their blood would take them before their time. Her eyes went to Jerath. He'd likely be dead before he saw his first grey hair.

Her mind went to the notes he'd given her, the one's he'd retrieved from Soldier's Peak. Maybe... maybe she could find a way. Cleanse the taint. Grow old.

In the meantime, she'd enjoy what time she had remaining.

50. Chapter 50

Eamon folded his arms and narrowed his eyes at the men who entered the room. "Loghain. This is... an honor, that the regent would find time to greet me personally."

"How could I not welcome a man so important as to call every lord in Ferelden away from his estates while a Blight claws at our land?" Loghain gestured angrily.

"The Blight is why I'm here. With Cailan dead, Ferelden must have a king to lead it against the darkspawn."

Loghain shook his head. "Ferelden has a strong leader: its queen. And I lead her armies."

Saitada stepped to Eamon's side. "If Anora rules, let her speak for herself." That Anora was not here did not bode well.

Loghain looked down at her. "Ah, the Grey Warden recruit. I thought we might meet again. You have my sympathies on what happened to your order. It is unfortunate that they chose to turn against Ferelden."

It was all she could do not to put a hand to her sword. How dare he dishonor Duncan like that. "Enough of this. When does the Landsmeet begin?"

"Don't interrupt, churl. Your betters are talking," said the woman at Loghain's right.

"Enough, Cauthrien, this is not the time or place. I had hoped to talk you down from this rash course, Eamon. Our people are frightened: Our king is dead. Our land is under siege. We must be united now, if we are to endure this crisis. Your own sister, Queen Rowan, fought tirelessly to see Ferelden restored. Would you see her work destroyed? You divide our nation and weaken our efforts against the Blight with your selfish ambitions to the throne."

A pretty speech. Too bad it was the man who'd caused all those problems that was delivering it. "What efforts can there be when you outlaw the Grey Wardens?"

"Cailan depended on the Grey Warden's prowess against the darkspawn, and look how well that ended. Let us speak of reality, rather than tall tales. Stories will not save us."

"I cannot forgive what you've done, Loghain. Perhaps the Maker can, but not I. Our people deserve a king of the Theirin bloodline. Alistair will be the one to lead us to victory in this Blight."

"Oh, is that all I have to do. No pressure..." Saitada wanted to kick Alistair. This was not the time for him to be showing weakness. Maybe she should have taken Jerath's suggestion. She was grateful that Cathiel was holding her own tongue, though if looks could kill, the one she was giving Howe would bring down the archdemon.

"The emperor of Orlais also thought I could not bring him down. Expect no more mercy than I showed him. There is nothing I would not do for my homeland." With that, Loghain turned and stormed out, followed by the rest of his men.

Eamon let out a sigh of relief. "Well, that was... bracing. I didn't expect Loghain to show himself quite so soon."

Cathiel let out a snarl. "Howe killed my family. I can't let him get away with it."

Eamon gave her a sympathetic look. "I would not ask you to. But bear in mind that he will be well-protected by his alliance with Loghain." Distaste showed on his face. "He always seemed the kind of man who enjoyed kicking stray dogs. I would not have thought Loghain would trust him." He shook his head. "We need eyes and ears in the city. Loghain has been here for months. The roots of all his schemes must begin here. The sooner we find them, the better we can turn them to our advantage."

Saitada nodded. "You heard him. Leliana, Brehan, eyes and ears. Go. Cathiel, introduce Alistair to what nobles you know. Sten, go with them, play bodyguard. Jerath, you're from Denerim, see what you can find. The rest of you, help out, stay out of trouble."

#

Jerath picked up the package from the smith, and started back into the manor when he saw a woman enter the

courtyard. She gestured at him. "You, rabbit, come here."

He sighed, but walked over to her. "Yes?"

"I am looking for someone." She began to describe Leliana.
"Do you know this woman?"

He nodded.

"Is she in?"

"Not at the moment."

"Escort me to her quarters then, I have a gift I would like to leave for her." She held out a royal.

He took the coin. "This way." He set the parcel on a table, then led her past the servants quarters. "Are you a friend of Leliana's?" He had a feeling he knew the answer already.

"Oh, yes. Leliana and I go back a long way."

He led the woman towards the alley exit of the house. "Her room is right through here. What did you say your name was?"

"Marjolaine. Thank..."

"That's what I thought." He drove the knife up under her ribs in a smooth motion. "Should have left when she told you too."

She gasped once. He kicked the door open and carted her

body to the dry well. He held onto the knife as he let the body fall, then went back to the manor. An elven servant held the door open for him. He handed her the coin, and she smiled. "You were the one that killed Vaughan."

"Yes."

"He hurt my daughter. You need anything, you let me know."

"Know where Slim is hiding these days?"

#

"Wonderful, another one. I suppose you're here to ask for a donation, too."

Cathiel slid into the seat across from the man. He blinked at her. "You're the youngest Cousland, aren't you. Probably looking for coin or men to take your teynir back. You're better off asking the darkspawn. They hold the West Hills now."

"Oh, uncle, I'm so sorry." Tears filled her eyes. "Your boys?"

"War claims the young and strong first. And plague doesn't care about skill or bravery."

She put her hands on his, and he clung to them for a moment. "I'm with the Grey Wardens. We've been gathering an army."

"I've nothing left for you."

"All we need is your voice. We have Orzammar, and the

mage behind us. Even the Dalish are sending aid. We just need Ferelden to answer the call of Maric's surviving son, Alistair."

Wulff looked at her. For a moment, she saw the tiniest glimmer of hope in his eyes. "You look like your mother, you know." He nodded. "Call, girl. And I will answer."

#

"Brosca?"

"Hey Junior, whatcha need?"

"Got your lockpicks?"

Brosca raised an eyebrow. "Yes."

"Want to go steal Loghain's crown?"

He started to laugh, and then blinked. "Stone, you serious?" He looked Jerath over. "Where have you been all day?"

"Embarking on a life of crime. You in or not?"

Brosca snorted. "Like I'd miss this." He considered. "Want me to get Fireball and Zev?"

"Subtle isn't really their thing."

"Good point. Let's go."

#

"I examined your scrolls. I know a few of the early Chantry ciphers, but I am not fully familiar with this one," Justine said. She was practically giddy with excitement. "The bits I have made out... This may be an account of Maferath's final days and perhaps more."

Brehan glanced at Leliana, who was just staring at the other woman. "Maferath - as in Andraste's husband?" he asked.

"I know; it's remarkable. The same Maferath who betrayed our prophet and saw her burn alive in Minrathous. If we could get a real translation, well, it could be the find of our lifetime!"

He smiled. Leliana beamed. "Could we get a copy of the translation?" he asked.

"When I finish decoding it, absolutely. But it will not be easy. It could take months; the ciphers were designed to be difficult for the magisters to decrypt." She smiled. "Who knows what secrets we can uncover? What truths we can find?" She held out a coinpurse. "Here is all of the allowance I have for acquisitions."

Brehan closed her hand back over her purse. "We cannot take your coin. King Alistair will be pleased to know what we recovered will be useful to the Chantry."

Her eyes gleamed. "A thousand, thousand blessings."

Leliana put her arm around his waist as they left. He looked down at her. "Next?"

"Our next task is going to be very unpleasant," she said.

"Oh?"

Leliana sighed. "We are about to go before the nobility of Ferelden. We must somehow convince certain of our friends to look the part."

Brehan considered. "What did we do with that drakeskin?"

#

"Where is Brosca?" Saitada said, looking from Lenore to Zevran.

Lenore shook her head. "He went with Jerath about three hours ago. They said they'd be back by lunch."

"There they are," Zevran said.

Saitada narrowed her eyes as she saw Jerath and Brosca walking back to the house. They looked as if they'd been in a recent fight, and Brosca looked very irritated. She sighed. "Where have you two been?"

"Staying out of trouble," Jerath replied.

"Really?" She looked them over. "And how is that going?"

"Badly."

She shook her head. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"Plausible deniability is a virtue in a leader." Brosca said. He gestured towards Lenore and Zevran. "Hey, Zev, Fireball!"

"Yes, amor?" Zevran said.

"We need backup, you two game?"

"Backup for what?" Saitada asked.

"You do not want to know," Jerath told her.

"It worries me that I think you are right about that," Saitada said.

"Relax, we are just running a couple errands for the guards, mostly," Brosca said. "Town is running a bit lawless right now."

#

Kylon shook his head. "And people actually voluntarily attack you? Are they just stupid?"

"Most of um, yeah." Brosca grinned at the man.

"Here's the payment I promised."

"Nah, keep your coin," Brosca told him. "This was a courtesy."

"A courtesy?"

Brosca gestured at Lenore, Jerath, and Zevran. "King Alistair asked if we wouldn't mind helping out a bit."

Kylon raised an eyebrow, and then nodded slowly. "You have my gratitude." He considered a moment. "A lot of folk swallow whatever lies are fed to them, but us believers will try and spread word about you and the Wardens."

"Much appreciated. Let us know if you need anything else."

"I will."

Brosca waited for him to walk away. "So, this other thing?"

"Much as I hate to say this..." Jerath sighed. "We need to head back to the Pearl."

"Heh."

#

Brehan looked around the library. He frowned, then went into the next room. "Morrigan, have you seen Lenore?"

"She is with Brosca and Zevran. They dragged Jerath off somewhere."

"Oh. Are you busy then?"

She grimaced. "If one more servant asks if I would like a

change of clothes, I will set the house on fire."

Brehan made a mental note to mention that to Leliana. "We found some trouble, and could use a mage. Up for some killing?"

He almost laughed at how quickly she bounded to her feet. "Let us make haste."

They met Leliana in the corridor. She sighed. "I couldn't find Jerath, Saitada is with Eamon, and Alistair and Sten are out somewhere. So..." She sighed. "I have Oghren and Shale."

Oghren belched. "Where we going?"

"Minor blood mage issue."

"Let us go crush the squishy mages then."

#

"What's the password?" A voice on the other side of the door said.

"The griffons will rise again," Jerath replied. Brosca gave him a questioning look, and he shrugged.

"Come in. Quickly."

The door opened, and they were ushered inside.

A heavily armed man grinned at them wickedly. "More Grey

Warden supporters," he said, putting a hand on his sword. Brosca noticed a few dried pools of blood around the room. He glanced at Jerath, who winked at him.

A woman to his left smiled maliciously. "Not just supporters, Paedan. Those are Grey Wardens." She nodded. "Not the one Arl Howe is offering the bonus for, but these are on the list."

Paedan's grin broadened. "Our trap landed wardens? You've got one chance to surrender."

Brosca blinked, and then started laughing. "Surrender? Stone, that's bloody hilarious." He glanced at Jerath. "There's four of them, and they are asking us to surrender. Us."

"Perhaps we should let them go get friends? That would make it more sporting, no?" Zevran said.

"Jerath, do we need one alive for questioning, or can I just set them all on fire?" Lenore asked.

Jerath shrugged. "I was planning on killing all of them, but they offered us a chance to surrender. Seems fair we give them the same courtesy."

The smiles on the faces of the men in front of them turned to confusion. Paedan shook his head. "I don't think you get it. We're not common guards, Warden. We're Howe's elite."

Lenore laughed so hard she actually snorted. "The elite? Oh

for... Didn't we kill like forty of these guys on our way up the Frostbacks?"

"Thirty six," Jerath said.

Brosca shook his head. "I counted thirty four."

"The two archers were simple bandits," Zevran said.

"I was thinking of those mages."

"Ah, well, then, you're right, thirty six." Brosca shrugged. "I got ten silver says Lenore can freeze all of them solid in one go."

"I'll take that," Jerath said.

#

"Pay up, Junior."

"My apologies for having doubted you, Lenore."

"She is a marvel, is she not?" Zevran kissed her cheek. "So, we are still in the Pearl, perhaps..."

"You can go play." Jerath shrugged. "I need to let Ignacio know the job is done."

Zevran blinked. "Ignacio?" He shook his head. "Ignacio is here?"

"Trouble, Zevran?" Brosca asked.

"I..." Zevran sighed. "Jerath, my friend, if you are getting involved in the Crows on my behalf..."

"I'm involved because someone is paying the Crows to deal with some of Howe's people. That assisting them in this is keeping them off your back is just a nice bonus." Jerath twitched a shoulder. "Cathiel said keeping the weak-willed moderates out of the Landsmeet would work to our advantage, so..."

Brosca started laughing. "Ah, so that's why the whole thing with that Couldry fellow. How many have we scared the shit out of so far?"

"Six." He shrugged. "This one was for us."

Zevran smiled. "So the ones otherwise intimidated by Loghain are now more scared of us, and the ones who see Loghain as the stable option now know it is we who protect them. Clever."

"I have learned from the best," Jerath said, giving them a small bow.

"Junior, right now, I couldn't be prouder of you if'n you were my own."

Lenore shook her head fondly. "Do we have a cover story for Saitada?"

"Kylon, of course," Brosca said. "We were helpin out the

guard to make Alistair look good."

"All right. Let's go finish being bad guys." Lenore giggled. "It's fun."

#

Brosca stood back by the door, letting Jerath do the talking. Junior had found the guy in the first place, after all. Lenore was by him, and Zevran just outside the room. They'd discussed the matter on the way back. He'd had wanted just to kill Ignacio for that stunt, but Zevran had convinced them to hear the other man out.

"I heard there was quite a scuffle in the alley ways." Ignacio gave a respectful bow. "Well done, Warden."

"The boy wasn't there," Jerath replied.

"Don't worry, Warden. Some 'friends' have rescued the boy." Ignacio gave a pleased smile. "He's already safely home and back with his father... his very important father. You already took care of the father's other requirement. The man who kidnapped his son, Captain Chase, is quite dead thanks to you."

Brosca relaxed, and gave Jerath a slight nod. "We done here?" Jerath asked.

"Your payment is in the chest. I hope you find it most satisfying. My superiors want me to convey their thanks. The

Crows aren't accepting any new contracts on you." He gave Jerath an appraising look, and then did the same to Brosca. "And when this Blight ends, we'd love you to visit Antiva to discuss other... opportunities."

"And the other matter?" Jerath asked. Brosca blinked. Junior hadn't mentioned any other matter.

"He arrived in Denerim this morning. I believe he will follow, and attempt an ambush the next time you find yourselves down an alley."

Jerath nodded, and then walked out of the room. The others followed. As soon as they were out of earshot, Brosca frowned. "What's the other matter?"

"There was a contract accepted on us before Ignacio made contact with me."

"And it will be active then, until we have killed those assassins," Zevran said. "The Crows do not cancel accepted contracts."

"So, we kill this bugger, we're clear?"

"Yes. Shall we go find him?" Jerath asked.

"Let us go assassinate the assassins," Lenore said.

#

"And so here are the mighty Grey Wardens at long last. The

Crows send their greetings, once again."

Brosca saw Zevran sigh. "So they sent you, Taliesen? Or did you volunteer for the job?"

The man atop the stairs laughed. "I volunteered, of course. When I heard that the great Zevran had gone rogue, I simply had to see it for myself."

Brosca saw Lenore's hand tighten on the branch she used as a staff. Jerath raised an eyebrow at Brosca, and Brosca just jerked his head at Zevran. Jerath gave him a nod, and stepped back to let Zevran play it out. "Is that so? Well here I am, in the flesh."

"You can return with me, Zevran. I know why you did this, and I don't blame you. It's not too late. Come back and we'll make up a story. Anyone can make a mistake."

Lenore's voice was cool, calm, and held just a trace of wolf. "Zevran belongs with us now."

Taliesen laughed. "You don't even know who you're talking about, do you?"

Zevran shook his head. "And neither do you, Taliesen." He put his hand on Brosca's shoulder. "I'm sorry, my old friend. But the answer is no. I'm not coming back... and you should have stayed in Antiva."

#

Jerath walked some distance away to let the three of them talk. Zevran stood over the body of his former friend. "And there is it." His voice was heavy and sad. "Taliesen is dead, and I am free of the Crows." He looked from Brosca to Lenore. "They will assume that I am dead along with Taliesen. So long as I do not make my presence known to them, they will not seek me out."

"So what does this mean?" Lenore asked.

"I do not know." Zevran inhaled, and looked thoughtful. "It seems I have options now, whereas once I had none." He looked down, then back up at them. "I suppose it would be possible for me to leave, now, if I wished. I could go far away, somewhere where the Crows would never find me." He looked from one to the other again. "I think, however, that I could also stay here. I made an oath to help you, after all. And saving the world seems a worthy task to see through to the end, yes?"

Lenore glanced at Brosca, and then smiled at Zevran. "If you want to go, you should go."

He blinked. "But that is what I am asking you. Do you want me to go? Do you need me here?"

Brosca took Lenore's hand. "We want you to do what's best for you."

He turned, then turned back, then shook his head. "I... am not sure how to respond to that. Nobody has ever... I mean,

normally these things are decided by others." He shuffled his feet, then looked from Lenore to Brosca. "Err... then I suppose I shall... stay? Is that... good?"

Lenore and Brosca held out their other hands to him. Lenore smiled impishly. "It would be hard to kiss you if you left."

He laughed, and took their hands, letting them draw him into the circle. "You know... that is so very true."

Brosca kissed him, and then Lenore did the same.

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"And the maid just happens to conveniently escape to bring a message straight to Arl Eamon?" Brosca asked skeptically.

"Cailan was Anora's husband. Is it that absurd to think she may have challenged her father over his death?" Cathiel responded.

"It's worth looking into, I suppose." Saitada responded, frowning. "We just need to come up with some kind of plan."

"Get guard or servant uniforms, sneak around the back, go in through the servants entrance." Jerath commented, making a sketch on the table with his fingertip. "Get through the main hall without anyone being the wiser, and it's pretty much a straight shot into the bedroom areas. Could pull it off with just a couple folks..." he caught Saitada's look. "What?"

"You used to work at the estate?"

Jerath shook his head. "Broke in once before. Me and a friend of mine, guy named Soris. He wasn't much help."

Brehan snorted. Ah, so now we know the truth. You got caught and Duncan recruited you out of jail."

Jerath turned his head to look at Brehan. "No, not out of jail."

He turned back to Saitada. "Guard uniforms would be better, man like Howe's going to be recruiting."

Saitada gave Brehan a look, causing the Dalish to bite back whatever smart remark he was planning to make. "We can't risk the queen getting hurt."

"Give me Cathiel, Zevran..." Jerath sketched the table with his finger a bit more. "Might need a mage. Morrigan can move in armor if she has too."

Saitada nodded. "Do it. I'll stay here and coordinate our new support with Eamon. Lenore, you and Wynne go through what Brehan and Leliana found on those mages, see if you can't find anything that traces them back to the blood mages. Sten, Oghren, stand by the gates of the place and look intimidating. If any of the others get into trouble, I want you positioned to get to them as fast as you can. Oghren, I see that bottle one more time I'm getting a hammer and it's going in your other end." Oghren dropped the bottle and kicked it under the table, painting an expression of injured innocence on his face.

"Jerath, good luck. Keep the queen out of danger, if you can."

#

Cathiel glanced at Jerath, who raised an eyebrow at her. "Something amiss?"

Cathiel shook her head. "Just surprised you asked for me on this trip."

Jerath shrugged. "We are going to the Arl's estate. Good chance Howe will be there. Thought you might want to have a little chat with him."

Cathiel smiled slowly. "I do indeed." Her hand went to her arrows. "Very much."

"She is lovely when she has that bloodthirsty gleam in her eye, no?" Zevran said. He glanced up at Jerath. "So, what's the story? You break in here, rob the place blind or something?"

Jerath shrugged. "Or something

Zevran laughed. "There is Erlina."

#

Jerath helped Morrigan buckle into her armor. Zevran ended up having to do the same for Cathiel, as she had a bit of trouble with the heavy plate. She glared when he leered, and he merely winked in response.

Erlina glanced at them. "I can distract the guards, but you must move quickly."

"Why bother? There's only two of them," Cathiel said. She could take them both down with arrows easily.

The elven maid shook her head. "More guards patrol every hour. If they find these two missing, they will know... how you say? Something is amiss."

"Why so many patrols?" Cathiel asked.

"After what happened to the last Arl, Howe is cautious."

Cathiel sighed. "Let's go."

Erlina immediately went up the guards, wringing her hands in fright. "Oh! You must come! I saw something! By the fountain! I think it was a darkspawn!"

"Darkspawn?" The guard gave her a skeptical look.

She gestured hysterically. "They will drag us all underground to be eaten!"

The guard shifted uneasily, and looked at his companion. "Should we call for help?"

"They cannot be buying this," Cathiel muttered.

The other guard shook his head. "Did you fall off a cart full of stupid? Call for help? So they can see us act like scared little girls because of some knife-eared wench?"

"They will eat us all alive! Please! Get help!"

"She looks ridiculous," Cathiel muttered.

"If there is something out there and we don't sound the alarm, we'll look worse than scared."

"Andraste's holy knickers! Fine, we'll check the courtyard, if

it'll keep you from wetting yourself. But there's nothing there."

"Thank you! Oh! It was over here! Quickly."

Cathiel ran a hand down her face. "Are you kidding me?"

#

"Here, I bought you a towel, a bar of soap and a razor while we were at the market."

"Aye? What is this for?" Oghren asked.

"You wash with it," Wynne said patiently.

"I know what soap is, woman!" Oghren said. Personally, Brehan had his doubts, but he wished Wynne the best of luck.

"What is this flimsy slip of metal?"

"It's a razor. you shave with it."

"Shave! Any warrior worth his salt keeps his beard! That's what I keep telling Alistair."

"It's matted! It has stale food stuck in it!"

"Oh, so that's where that bit of herring got to. Anyway, it keeps my face warm. It doesn't have to be pretty. 'Sides, the ladies love it. Tickles them in all the right places if I wag my chin like this."

"Augh! Just take it. Take it!"

"I could easily have lived my entire life without seeing that," Leliana whispered.

"Ma suledin inan abelas." He shook his head. "Shall we go see how Wade is doing?"

#

"Those are the worse guards ever," Cathiel muttered.

Jerath sighed. "Cathiel, I promise, next time we need to distract a guard, I'll let you do it, okay?"

She chuckled, and gave him a fond shake of her head. "How did you distract the guard when you broke in?"

"I cut his throat."

Zevran laughed. "That would do the trick, no?"

Erlina entered behind them. "Ah! It took me forever to be rid of those two!" She gave them a warning look. "You must be careful now. The servants, they will not look too closely at anyone in uniform. All guards are alike to a cook, no? But you should not draw attention to yourself. Most of the guards are new. They will not know you for a stranger at a glance. It is best you keep your distance from all of them and try to blend in."

"Where's Anora?" Cathiel asked.

"She is in a guest room off the main hall."

"This way," Jerath said.

"Andraste guide us," Erlina said, as she followed.

#

"This is my lady's room. We must hurry." Erlina went ahead.
"The Grey Wardens are here, my lady."

A voice came from the other side of the door. "Thank the Maker! I would greet you properly, but I'm afraid we've had... a setback."

Naturally. Why couldn't anything just go to plan? "What kind of setback?" Cathiel asked.

Anora's voice was frustrated and angry. "My 'host' was not content with leaving me under heavy guard. He's sealed the door by magic."

Cathiel gave Morrigan a quick look. The swamp witch examined the barrier, and then shook her head. "Great, now what?" Cathiel asked.

"We must get her out of there!" Erlina wrung her hands.

"Don't panic, Erlina," Anora said, barely hiding the annoyance in her voice. "Find the mage who cast the spell. He'll most likely be at Howe's side."

Cathiel gritted her teeth at the command. "Fine. We'll be back soon."

"Thank you, Warden. My prayers go with you."

"Teyrn Howe," Erlina recoiled from the look Cathiel shot her. She swallowed. "Will probably be in his rooms."

"End of the hall, on the left," Jerath said.

Erlina looked at him, then suddenly her eyes widened. "It was you?"

"Yes."

"Maker."

Cathiel blinked. Jerath shook his head. "Let's go."

#

Cathiel's jaw dropped when the prisoner reached out, caught the guard by the throat, and snapped his neck. A moment later, the door swung open, and the prisoner began stripping the guard of his armor with quick, efficient movements. She could sense him. She glanced at Jerath, and he nodded. The prisoner was a warden.

"I thank you for creating such a distraction, stranger. I have been waiting weeks for this opportunity." He began putting the armor on. "You never hear music in the sound of a key turning in a lock until you've been imprisoned."

"Who are you?" Cathiel asked.

"I am Riordan. Senior Grey Warden of Jader. And you... must be Duncan's recruits. Yes, you match the description. Jerath, yes?"

"Yes."

Riordan nodded. "And you are Lenore?"

"Cathiel Cousland."

"Ah... I heard that rumor. I am pleased to learn it is true."

"Are these your papers?" she asked.

"Yes. These are my records. The names of the dead I could recognize at Ostagar. What I could find of Duncan's own recruitment records. Copies of the Joining ritual I rescued from our Denerim vault. Those should never be seen by any outside eyes, but I trust in their encryption."

Cathiel blinked. "What vault?"

"The Grey Wardens have long maintained a vault in Denerim, with spare supplies for battle. It is protected by a coded lock."

"That would have been helpful," Cathiel said.

"When I went there recently, it had clearly been tampered with - I presume by Loghain, since you appear to have not known of its existence - but it remained impermeable."

"How did Arl Howe capture you?"

"With an offer of hospitality and a poisoned chalice. I was fool enough to think Loghain didn't yet know who I was."

"The way out is clear enough," Jerath said. "The rest of the order is at Arl Eamon's manor. Report to Warden Commander Saitada."

Riordan blinked at Jerath, and then nodded. "Will do."

Cathiel waited for him to leave, and then glanced at Jerath. "Are you supposed to be ordering senior wardens?"

"This is Ferelden. We are the senior wardens."

"I guess we are."

#

"Who goes?"

"Oh, quit kidding around, you know me," Cathiel said.

"You think you're clever, do you?" The guard sneered at her. She sighed. How was it this kind of thing worked for Brosca? "Anybody tries to come in here without Howe's say so, we get to do what we liked with 'em. I think we finally got a bit of entertainment here, lads!"

He started forward, and his head exploded. Morrigan laughed. "Oh, indeed. Most entertaining."

Cathiel laughed as she began firing her arrows.

"Ten silvers says Cathiel can kill more than Morrigan," Zevran said to Jerath.

"I'll take that."

#

"Well?"

"I'm going to have to call that a tie," Jerath said.

"No, Cathiel got the last one with an arrow to the eye. Beautifully shot by a beautiful woman."

"Thank you Zevran," Cathiel said from where she was disarming the trap.

"He was already dying from Morrigan's spell. Nature is as deadly as she is lovely."

"True, but there is something about the taunt pull of a bowstring, and that glorious moment of release."

"But is it comparable to the tumult of harnessing the very elements, and that primal energy?"

"You are forgetting the ecstasy of that moment of penetration, my friend."

"What is a single moment compared to the raw, savage caress of power that can be neither tamed nor denied?"

"Maker's breath, what are you two talking about?" Cathiel said, staring at them.

Both faces were a mask of innocence. "Which of you is the most efficient at combat, of course," Zevran said.

Morrigan grinned and stroked her hand down Jerath's cheek. "Another time."

"Of course. Where were we?"

#

"You there. Aye, you."

"Yes, Oghren?" Lenore said.

"I've been watching you. Where can I get some sauce for that rump roast?"

Brosca looked out from behind her. "Right here, you mad dwarven stallion."

"Go and make yourself ready, woman. I'll be right there to see to it." He stood, and then fell face first onto the carpet. A moment later, there was a loud snore.

Eamon blinked. "What just happened?"

"Oghren went crazy and fell down," Lenore said. She shrugged. "It happens."

Alistair walked over and grabbed Oghren's wrists, and Broasca got his ankles. The two started carting Oghren away. Eamon blinked again. "It... happens?"

"Oh, don't worry. I've got some tea that fixes things, he'll be ready to go as soon as we need him to swing a sword at anything."

"I... see..."

"Where do you keep your buckets?" Lenore considered a moment. "And do you happen to have ice?"

"Uh..."

"Never mind, I can make some."

#

"Oswyn?"

"Was this supposed to be a lesson? Did my father think it funny to leave me for so long before sending you?"

Jerath handed Cathiel his cloak, and she draped it around the wounded man. "Are you all right?"

"All right? You taunt me with such a question. After what they've done, I doubt I'll ever be able to raise my arms again." He shook his head, near to tears. "All right? What do such words even mean?" He blinked at her, and then looked again. "Cathiel? Cathiel Cousland?"

"Oh, Oswyn." She put her arms around him as he clung to her. "Morrigan, could you work some healing magic for him?" She waited for the other woman to step forward, then stroked Oswyn's hair soothingly. "I'm here with the Grey Wardens, for the rightful king Alistair."

"You have my heartfelt gratitude. And you will have the gratitude of the entire Dragon's Peak Bannorn." He shook his head, taking a deep breath as Morrigan's magic did its work. "If my father sent no one after me, I can only assume that he does not yet know the true colors of the snakes he has allied with."

"Why was Arl Howe torturing you?"

"One soldier returning from Ostagar was my wet nurse's son. We have been friends since birth." Outrage filled his voice. "He told me his unit was ordered to turn their backs on Cailan at Ostagar... before the darkspawn overwhelmed him." He swallowed. "The next day, he disappeared. When I went to search for him... I accepted a drink from a stranger and ended up here."

"Loghain will not get away with this."

"It is hard to imagine anyone with the power to take Loghain down. I swear, if there be any forum to speak out against Loghain, my father will be there."

"We'll take you to the stairs. Wait with Erlina, and we will get you out."

"Maker bless you."

#

"Andraste, Bride of the Maker, have mercy on me." The man's blood-shot eyes focused on her. "Alfstanna... is that you, little sister?" He squinted. "No... I don't know you... do I? Are you real?"

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Alfstanna? I... don't know. Where is my sister. Have you seen her?" He shook his head. "I... I'm Irminric, knight-lieutenant of the Denerim chantry. You... aren't one of the teyrn's men."

"I'm Cathiel Cousland."

"I... I failed in my duties. Maker, forgive me. I failed, and there's no telling what he's done..."

"You're a templar?" She nodded to herself. Bann Alfstanna's elder brother.

"Alfstanna is... a far better bann than I would have been... but I... don't remember how I came to be here..."

"Lyrium withdrawal," Jerath said.

"The maleficar. He had turned blood magic upon templars and Circle mages to escape from his tower. Near Redcliffe, I cornered him..." He furrowed his brow in concentration. "But

the teyrn's men took him from me... and brought me here...

"This maleficar, was his name Jowan?" Jerath asked. Cathiel sighed. Blood mage. Of course. Why had Lenore let that man go?

"Yes. He... destroyed his phylactery... we were spread out, trying to find him... I was alone." He blinked at them. "I... you are real, aren't you? My dreams are... so strange now. Please, if you're not a dream, help me."

"What do you want me to do?" Cathiel asked.

"Give this ring... to my sister, Alfstanna. Tell her... tell her I'm sorry. Please. Ask her... to pray for me."

Cathiel looked at Jerath. "We'll have to get him after we find Howe. I don't think he can make it back on his own."

He nodded. "Let's keep moving."

#

"Ach! Leliana, get this stupid beast out of here."

"I am sorry, Oghren, was he disturbing you?"

"No, but if he isn't careful I'm going to start thinking about how delicious he looks. A little taste of home, eh?"

"Um, I will make sure Schmooples is never underfoot again."

"Schmooles? You named a nug Schmooles? The last thing we need around here is a walking snack named Schmooles!" He walked off, muttering.

"Schmooles?" Brehan asked.

"Well, what would you have named him?" Leliana put her hands on her hips and glared.

"Ir abelas, ma'arlath. Schmooles is a perfectly lovely name, and suits him beautifully."

Leliana scooped the nug up and walked away. Alistair snickered. "Did you see your life flash before your eyes there?"

"Emma shem'nan, lethallin."

#

He was wearing one of her father's cloak pins. The one her mother had made special, an emerald eyed mabari, worn for the first time when Fergus had married Oriana. Oren had pleaded to be allowed to wear it when they'd attended the feast at the fall tourney. He'd come to her in tears, having dropped it while playing with the servants' children, and she'd had to climb halfway down the bluffs to retrieve it. Mother Mallol had caught them, but kept their secret.

It took her a moment to even realize Howe was talking. "Well, look here. Bryce Cousland's little spitfire, all grown up and still

playing the man. I never thought you'd be fool enough to turn up here. But then, I never thought you'd live, either."

"Why betray us, Howe? My father was your friend!" Did it even matter?

"A clumsy appeal, child. He was a traitor to me and a coward to his nation! Trips to Orlais, gifts from old enemies; all while I sank in obscurity. Your family squandered glory that was rightfully mine. How suitable that their deaths should raise me to the ear of a king."

"After this, I'll kill your wife and children, too." She just might. Maybe she'd pay Zevran to do it.

Howe sneered at her. "Isn't that precious. Is this where I lament the monster I helped create? You're still so very new to this. Shall I show you how it's done? I made your mother kiss my feet as she died. It was the last thing your father saw. Your parents died on their knees, your brother's corpse rots in Ostagar, and his brat was burned on a scrap heap along with his Antivan whore of a wife. And what's left? A fool husk of a daughter likely to end her days under a rock in the Deep Roads. Even the Wardens are gone. You're the last of nothing. This is pointless. You've lost."

Her first arrow took him low in the gut. He staggered backwards. Father. Jerath's dagger took the mage in the eye. Before the mage even started to fall, Morrigan's spell erupted in the midst of the guards, burning and scorching. Howe tried to draw his sword, and Cathiel sent an arrow into his knee

before turning her attention back to the other guards. The cry of agony he let out warmed her heart. Mother.

Another guard charged Jerath, who sidestepped nimbly and stabbed him low in the back. The human man collapsed and Jerath kept moving, taking out the guards that were rushing at Morrigan as Zevran began finishing off the ones that had survived the spell. Howe tried to go for his crossbow, and she put an arrow in his hand. He screamed again. Oriana. Cathiel aimed her bow at the other mage, and then began picking off the ones trying to escape the elves. The battle was over in moments.

Jerath turned, and kicked Howe onto his back. Cathiel realized the man was alive, though he seemed to be having great difficulty trying to make his legs work. Jerath met her eyes, and then drew his blade. He leveled it at Howe's throat, and raised an eyebrow at Cathiel.

"You lie, Howe. To yourself most of all. I am a Grey Warden."

He spat. "There it is. Right there! That damned look in the eye that marked every Cousland success that held me back. It would appear you have made something of yourself after all. Your father would be proud. I, on the other hand, want you dead more than ever."

Cathiel drew an arrow and silently nocked it. Howe tried to pull himself away, but Jerath used his sword to make Howe watch her. She drew, aimed, and loosed the arrow into Howe's heart. Oren.

"Maker spit on you... I deserved... more..."

Cathiel starred down at Howe, watching him choke out his last breaths. Looking up, she caught Jerath's eye. He was watching her, that same calm expression on his face.

"Better?"

She shook her head. "It didn't change anything."

"Never does, really. Feels really good for a minute, but doesn't change the past. Just stops it from happening again."

She blinked, and then turned to face him. "Is that... is it enough?"

"That part is up to you."

She nodded. It wasn't. It never would be. They were gone. She was never going to see them again. She looked at Howe, where he lay in his own blood, and bent to remove the pin.

"You are right though."

"Oh?"

Her smile was cold. "It felt really good."

"That was a nice touch of drama at the end, truly." Zevran imitated drawing back a bow. "I liked the whole slowly taking aim bit. Next time, we should have music."

Morrigan laughed, and even Jerath smiled at that.

#

Erlina was helping Anora dress in a guard uniform. Oswyn was nearby, still wrapped in a cloak. He was shaking slightly. Irminic followed them like a lost puppy. Of Riordan, there was no sign. "My thanks," Anora said, looking up at them.

"Why are you dressed like that?" Cathiel asked.

Anora gave an impatient shake of her head. "Because there are two sorts of people in this house: those loyal to Howe, and those loyal to me." And those loyal to Alistair, Cathiel added silently. The ones that just saved your ass. "If Howe's people find me, I'll be killed. And my people will insist on escorting me back to the palace... where my father may also have me killed."

They walked into the next room. Cathiel sighed. It was filled with guards. She recognized the woman who led them. "Wardens!" Cauthrien's voice was firm. "In the name of the regent, I am placing you under arrest for the murder of Rendon Howe and his men-at-arms." She pointed her blade at them. "Surrender, and you may be shown mercy."

"We are here to free Anora, who was held captive," Cathiel said. She saw Jerath start to shake his head, and sent him a questioning look.

Cauthrien laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. The queen isn't being held prisoner here or anywhere else. Her father would never stand for such a thing."

She turned to Anora. "She's right here. Tell her, Anora."

Jerath winced. "What?" Cauthrien asked.

"Ser Cauthrien! Praise the Maker you're here... This brigand tried to kidnap me!" Anora moved away from them.

"You double-crossing bitch!" Cathiel began to reach for her bow. She saw Jerath give the slightest shake of his head, and flick his eyes towards Oswyn. "We will stand down," Jerath said.

Morrigan blinked, and whispered, "we have killed so many other guards. What do a few more matter?"

"Get the queen and the others to safety." He glanced at her. "Trust me." He jerked his head at Cathiel, and she walked forward with him. She saw Anora and the others begin to walk away. A count of five, perhaps, just long enough for the queen to get to safety, and then go for the bow.

"I'm surprised this ended peacefully," Cauthrien said. "Bring the Wardens. Loghain doesn't care about the rest."

One of the guards took a step forward. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, and he looked at Jerath. "Don't I know you?"

Jerath's smile showed more than a hint of fang. The guard's eyes widened, and he brought his gauntleted fist into the side of Jerath's head with considerable force. Cathiel blinked at the elf fell. So much for fighting their way out.

"Korvar!" Cauthrien called out.

"Apologies, Ser Cauthrien." The guard shook his head. "That knife ear's dangerous. This is the second time he's broken into this manor to kill an arl."

Cathiel raised an eyebrow. Oh.

52. Chapter 52

Saitada stood up when she heard the sound of footsteps moving urgently towards them. Morrigan and Zevran flanked Erlina and a blond woman as they entered the study. This would be Anora, then.

"Eamon! We have a problem."

Morrigan gave the woman a distasteful look. "We have more than one, I think." From the way the witch was holding her staff, it was clear she was considering doing Anora some harm.

Zevran shook his head. "I suspect we are going to need a good plan, or a lot of knights, or perhaps both."

"Calm down." Eamon said, raising his hands. "What has happened?"

"The Wardens have been captured."

"What? How could this happen?" Eamon asked. From the looks Morrigan and Zevran sent Anora, Saitada had a fair idea.

"Never mind that." Anora waved a dismissive hand. "The question is how to free them."

"I know where they are. I can locate Jerath anywhere. Getting to him, however, is quite something else. They are in Fort Drakon.

Saitada frowned. "Eamon, what do you know about this fort?"

"For starters, it's impenetrable." Eamon sighed. "We may have to continue without them."

"Not an option." Saitada stated firmly. "Perhaps we could..."

#

Cathiel jumped up as Jerath started to stir. "Oh, you're awake. I was starting to worry."

He touched the side of his head. "I seem to spend way too much time in prisons lately."

"Join the Grey Wardens! See the sights from the floors of the best prisons in the land! It's not much of a recruitment slogan, is it? I've never seen a prison from this side before. Very scenic. Where are we?"

He looked around. "I'm not entirely sure. It's not the royal palace dungeon, I think. Too orderly. Fort Drakon, perhaps. That doesn't really bode well for us."

"It is possible you do spend way too much time in prisons. Or get hit in the head too often."

"Shall we get out of here, then?"

"I hope you have a plan."

"Maybe." He stood, then looked around again. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Feeling seductive?"

She glared at him. "Jerath, I'm naked in a dirty prison cell."

"I noticed. You make it look good. Call the guard over."

Cathiel shook her head. "Ass." She stood, and leaned against the bars of the cell. "Hey, you!"

"If you're not bleeding, I don't care."

She batted her eyes. "I was just lonely..."

He gave her a leering smile. "Well, I could keep you company..."

He opened the cell. As he stepped through, Jerath caught him and smashed his face into the door. As the guard stumbled, dazed, Jerath shoved him into the cell, pulling the key ring off the guard's belt as he did so.

"Coming?"

Cathiel laughed. "Right behind you."

"Why you grimy little..."

Jerath closed the cell door, smashing the guard in the face again. Cathiel laughed. She gestured at them. "Our situation

has improved slightly. We are now merely naked in a dungeon."

Jerath narrowed his eyes. "I think the proper term for this would be 'torture chamber'."

"That doesn't make me more optimistic." She started walking towards where the guard had been. "Let's see if we can't find some..." The inhabitant of another cell caught her eye. No. No, no. Could it... "Rory?"

#

Jerath blinked in confusion as Cathiel grabbed the keys from him and ran across the room to another cell. He noticed a chest near the entrance of the room and opened it, out some gear before following Cathiel. Inside the other cell, Cathiel was trying to get a red-haired man on his feet. "Jerath, help me, it's Rory."

Jerath pulled a pair of trousers on and draped a cloak over Cathiel before rummaging through the guard's desk. He found a healing draught. The man was skin and bones, and seemed only vaguely aware of their presence. It took a few moments before something resembling coherence returned to the man's eyes. "M...my lady? Am I dead then?"

"No. No, you are in Fort Drakon. We are going to get you out of here." She turned. "Jerath, we've got to get him out of here."

"Get dressed. I'll find something." He picked up the guard's spare sword, and went into the next room. This should be fun.

#

She thought she heard the sound of combat and dogs, and hurried with freeing Rory. He was battered and bruised. She could see scars all over him, and felt hot tears. "Oh, Rory, if I'd... I thought you were dead." She was applying a second poultice when Jerath returned, carrying a large parcel wrapped in a cloak. "Can he stand?"

Ser Gilmore struggled to his feet as Cathiel handed him the last of the poultices. "I think so."

"Good." Jerath set the cloak on the ground, revealing what appeared to be three sets of guard armor and weapons.

"Where did you find those?"

"Two of them on a rack. The dented one on the guy guarding the rack."

With Cathiel's aid, Ser Gilmore was able to get into the armor and strap the sword to his back. "I'm not sure fighting our way out is going to work. Ser Gilmore is barely able to walk."

"Then I suggest we simply walk through like we've a perfect right to be here. With any luck, they'll just assume we are fellow guards."

"You think that will work?"

"If it doesn't, get him on the ground and then shoot everything but me that is still standing."

"Great plan." She glared at him. "Wouldn't I need a bow for that?"

"You aren't naked anymore. You should be more optimistic. Stay behind me."

"Right. Any idea where you are heading?"

Jerath looked around briefly. "That way."

She shook her head. "This won't be easy."

"If it were easy, someone else would do it."

#

A lone guard stood in the armory. He looked up at them hopefully. "Hey, are you relieving me? It's about time."

Why not? "Yes." Jerath said. He gave an apologetic shrug. "Sorry I'm late."

"Good. Mind the blighted chain mail. The commander will skin us both if he finds any rust."

"I'll get on it." He saw the disbelieving look on Cathiel's face as the guard simply walked away. "Found you a bow." He tossed her the weapon.

"As soon as Alistair takes the throne, I'm advising him to fire everyone who works here."

"Probably a good idea." He retrieved himself a better sword, and handed on to Ser Gilmore. "This doesn't appear to be the exit. Shall we try the next room?"

#

Cathiel just about swallowed her tongue when the next room was full of armed men.

"What's this? Ah! You must be the new recruits we were expecting. You're late. The rest of your patrol is in the storage room. Find them, and get yourselves ready for inspection."

Jerath saluted, then walked back out of the room, heading in the direction the man had indicated.

Cathiel hissed at him. "What are you doing?"

He smiled at her. She'd never wanted to punch him so much as she did right now. "Getting the rest of our patrol. You don't want to fail inspection, do you?"

"This is your plan?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "You aren't naked, and you have a bow."

"So everything is going swimmingly?"

"You could try walking out of here naked, it would make a great distraction."

"I think I hate you." She shook her head at him. "Stop having fun."

"Now you sound like Saitada."

#

"Did you need something?" The guard that had been polishing a boot looked up at him.

"I was told we should get ready for inspection."

"You're in our patrol? I never saw you before."

"I'm new." Cathiel was grateful she was wearing a helmet. It hid the disbelieving look that crossed her face at Jerath's rather blatant lies. Brosca had been a terrible influence on their young friend.

"We've only been here two weeks ourselves."

"And we're already in hot water."

"So the assistant quartermaster... is a little miffed with us at present."

"I told you we should've put those potatoes in the cellar straight away."

"Some things went amiss. Mistakes were made. The quartermaster got chewed out by Teryn Loghain, and then he chewed out the assistant..."

"And now, to get back at us for landing him in trouble, the assistant quartermaster won't give us our blades. And you can't pass inspection without a regulation sword."

Maker. When Alistair fired these people, he needed to do it out of a trebuchet, into the sea. Or perhaps a volcano.

Jerath shrugged. "Let me handle him."

"He's down the hall. In the armory."

"Maker help us."

It couldn't be that easy, could it? She glanced at Rory, and saw his eyes were wide. They followed Jerath and the others back to the armory.

"Andraste's sacred girdle! He's gone!"

"Well, don't just stand there! Get your blade and let's report to the colonel before he gets back!"

Jerath casually handed both Ser Gilmore and Cathiel regulation blades and shields before grabbing a shield for himself.

#

The colonel glared down at them. It took all Cathiel's willpower not to just start giggling at the absurdity of it all. "So, you think you're ready to go on your first patrol mission, do you?"

"Yes, ser!" Jerath actually managed a proper salute.

The man smiled at him proudly. "That's what I like to hear! You there!"

"Yes, ser!" the guardsman said.

"Stand up straight! You're a soldier in the King's Army, and the King's own men don't slouch! And you!"

"Yes, ser!"

"Stop fidgeting. You can fidget on your own time."

"Yes ser! Thank you, ser!"

"Kiss-arse," the first guard muttered to the second.

The colonel looked at Rory. "You there, red!"

"Yes, ser?" Rory's voice was a bit hoarse.

"What's the one thing a soldier can't do without?"

"Discipline, ser!"

"Hmph. You're not as dumb as you look. See to it you all act

like soldiers of Ferelden out there. I expect the lot of you back here by sunup. Now get out of here. And Maker watch over you."

#

"Password?"

"Ah... "Rabbit," I think?"

"Going on your first patrol, are you? Good luck."

As they walked out, Jerath held up a hand. "Wait here, need to grab something."

"Don't take too long," the guardsman said.

"Just following orders." Jerath shrugged.

"Right."

Jerath slipped quickly into a side room. He came out a moment later, carrying a parcel. Cathiel didn't quite manage to hide her grin as she recognized her bow sticking out.

"Quartermaster asked me to drop these off during our patrol."

"Alright, let's get a move on," Cathiel said. Preferably before anyone noticed just how short Jerath was and decided to question that. Or question anything. It occurred to her that if they actually had planned any of this, it never would have worked.

They'd have to come up with a story. Nobody would ever believe the truth.

#

Saitada looked up as Jerath and Cathiel entered, followed by two rather confused looking human guards and a third man who looked exhausted. Cathiel looked at Saitada's startled face and chuckled. "Reporting for duty, Commander." She broke out in giggles.

Expressions of confusion began to turn to slowly dawning horror on the guards. One reached for his sword, and Jerath rather casually laid his sword against the guard's throat. Cathiel continued as if nothing happened. "You said keep the queen safe, so we decided to go along quietly and just break out later. No chance of her getting caught in the middle that way."

Jerath disarmed the guards. "As prisons go, it was actually fairly nice. We didn't even have to kill anyone on the way out."

Saitada sighed and shook her head. "Who are your new friends?"

"Prisoners?" Jerath shrugged and handed the swords over to Eamon. "Hostages? Emergency rations? I suppose that is up to you." The guards swallowed and edged away from Jerath.

Anora sighed. "You gentlemen can return to your, er... duties."

"Yes, your majesty," the taller guard said, his tone relieved. The other guard gave a squeak before fleeing. The third man, one who looked vaguely familiar, remained.

Saitada frowned. "They had absolutely no clue who you were until you came in here, did they?"

Cathiel was laughing so hard she had to hang onto Alistair to keep from falling over. "Before we came along, those two didn't even have swords."

Saitada just shook her head. "And this is...?"

Cathiel's face turned joyous. "This is Ser Gilmore! From home."

"Wonderful news!" She recognized him now, the young man who had almost been one of them.

Cathiel turned back to Ser Gilmore, who was starting to appear unsteady on his feet. "Wynne?"

She placed a steadying hand on Ser Gilmore's arm. "Come with me, young man. We'll get you fixed up in no time."

#

Saitada sighed and turned her attention back to Eamon. "Does Anora being here affect our plans for the Landsmeet?"

Anora shook her head. "I fear that my escape will make matters worse. Now that he cannot use me to support his

claim on Maric's throne, he may resort to drastic measures to stay in power. I doubt he will say anything publically... at least until he has a better idea what to expect."

"How much time do we have to stop him?" Saitada asked. She already knew the answer, but she wanted a better idea of the angles Anora was going to play.

"Very little. We will need to work together, and quickly. My father has gone mad. I didn't believe it at first, but he is gripped by a paranoia so severe it prevents him from seeing sense. He saw me as a threat, yet even now I am certain he will be telling the nobles you are dangerous murderers that have kidnapped and mind-controlled me. He may even believe it."

"So we rescued you..." Cathiel folded her arms and glared at the woman. "To what end?"

"You will need ammunition come the Landsmeet, and I can help in that regard. You have only just arrived in the city, so perhaps you are unaware of some...recent events. Denerim has been in turmoil since Ostagar. Many people here are angry or grieving. Strangely, the unrest is worst in the alienage. Few elves accompanied the army. They should have little reason to be upset. Which means that Howe and my father must have given them reason. I don't know what is happening there, but I am certain my father has his hands in it."

"A useful lead, Anora, but... you could have sent this

information with your maid," Eamon said.

"That is true. I feared for my safety as Howe's prisoner, but to tell the truth I sent Erlina to you because I hoped we might join forces. You need evidence for the Landsmeet, but you also need a stronger candidate for the throne. You need me."

"It sounds more like you need us." Saitada was content to let Cathiel do the talking. It freed her to watch Anora's face, and the anger in Cathiel's voice had Anora talking a bit more freely in an attempt to soothe the young woman's ruffled feathers.

"I have no doubt Alistair is biddable enough, and decent, but even with his blood he is no king. You think only I can see it? Not only that, Alistair is a Grey Warden. It will look like you are trying to put a Grey Warden on the throne, despite your claims. I am a neutral party - - and I am already queen."

Eamon shook his head. "Anora, you are indeed Cailan's widow, but..."

"I am the daughter of Ferelden's greatest general. Who do you think truly ruled this nation for the last five years? Cailan? I am what this country needs, not an untrained king who does not even want the throne. I can help you stop my father. Consider what I have said. For now, I think I will retire to my room. Commander, when you have a moment, I ask that you speak to me in private." She walked out of the room.

Eamon sighed. "Well, she's quite...spirited. I remember when Loghain first brought her to Denerim. Poor Cailan was a good

boy, but Anora was always two steps ahead. Had him jumping when she snapped since the first time she batted her eyelashes. I cannot help thinking she may be trouble. But we should keep her close, all the same."

"Why do you think she's trouble?" Other than the obvious reasons, of course, Saitada thought to herself. But then, Eamon had his own hand in this particular game, even if he was a piece she controlled.

"This is an alliance of convenience-for the moment, we are united against Loghain. Be careful how much trust you place in her. I do not for a moment think Anora means to give up her power easily. Still, I would rather have her where we can watch her than actively working for Loghain."

"But aren't we planning to dispose her?" Cathiel asked.

"Anora was a capable administrator for Cailan's lands, but she has not a drop of royal blood. We did not fight the Orlesians all those years just to lose our royal line in a single generation. Not when there's a surviving son of the blood."

Saitada considered a moment. Alistair was still entirely too reluctant to take the throne. He was a warrior, and at times she could see the prince in him. He'd last ten minutes in Orzammar, but for Ferelden, he could be the stuff of legend. She knew her preferred solution. Perhaps it was time to give things a little push. "Maybe Alistair should marry Anora."

"Are you serious?" Alistair's jaw nearly unhinged. "No. Never

mind. I-I don't' even want to hear the rest of this. Y-you two just keep talking about me. I'm going to stand over here, with my fingers in my ears."

Eamon actually looked like he was considering the idea. "That would certainly solve a lot of problems, and put forth the strongest argument before the Landsmeet to remove Loghain from power. With Theirin blood on the throne, and Anora's wisdom and popularity, Ferelden could present the most unified front against the Blight. Unfortunately, the marriage would never happen unless they both agreed to it." And they wouldn't, if she had her way. But then, that wasn't the point. "And I suspect that might take a lot of persuading to get past her pride and his humility."

#

Cathiel starred at Saitada. She waited until Eamon had left the room before the words burst out of her. "I cannot believe you just suggested that."

"Political marriages occur all the time." Saitada shrugged. "It's not like it would have to affect the two of you."

"This isn't Orzammar." Cathiel hissed. "I'm not going to be Alistair's concubine."

"No, I rather think you'd be better suited as his queen, but since the two of you seem content to merely carry on, I thought I'd examine other options." Saitada said.

Cathiel starred, dumbstruck, as Saitada continued. "Your parents did well by you, you are a capable administrator, a skilled warrior in your own right, and if I am beginning to understand Ferelden nobility, your blood is considerably closer to royal than Anora's. Highever and the Couslands are spoken of with respect, and after the deprivations of Arl Howe I can easily see Denerim rallying behind the last of the Couslands, returned to bring Howe to answer for his crimes."

Alistair interrupted, his voice low, "she makes a persuasive argument there."

Cathiel turned to face him. "Are you asking..."

"Marry me."

"Yes." Cathiel kissed him. "Yes."

She blinked as actual fireworks appeared in the air around them. With a sigh, she turned to look at Lenore. The mage was grinning quite unapologetically. She laughed, and then kissed Alistair again.

#

Saitada just shook her head. "Alright, I'll deal with Anora. Jerath..."

"I'm going to the Alienage."

"I need you to..."

"I'm going to the Alienage." Jerath stood up. Behind him, Morrigan rose quickly to follow.

Saitada sighed, and then nodded. "Very well. Take Sten and Zevran with you."

"I'm taking Alistair and Cathiel. They should see the alienage."

Saitada nodded. "Fine."

Jerath was already striding out of the room. Cathiel and Alistair scrambled quickly to follow.

53. Chapter 53

"Okay, how do we get into the alienage if the gate is sealed?" Alistair asked.

"You follow me," Jerath replied. He ducked down through an alley. He caught hold of a window ledge and pulled himself up to walk along the top of a fence, then jumped onto a roof.

"You remember the part where we aren't light-footed elves that only weight ten pounds, right?" Alistair asked. Next to him, Morrigan simply shifted into a raven and flew up to land on the roof next to Jerath.

"Wait there," Jerath said, and vanished. A minute later, the cellar door near them opened. "This way."

"How many secret passages are there like this in Denerim?" Alistair asked.

"Is that an official question, your majesty?" Jerath asked.

"Yes."

"Then none."

They emerged near a dock. Jerath led them immediately to a door, and opened it without bothering to so much as knock.

#

A handsome elf nearly dropped the cup he was holding as the four of them entered. "Cousin? Welcome home! Come in, come in! We assumed you were with the other Wardens at Ostagar. Things have been... difficult since you've been gone."

"What happened here?" There was a note of anger in Jerath's voice.

Soris shook his head. "Arl Howe led a purge. Vengeance for Vaughan's death, they say."

Jerath nodded. "How many died?" All emotion was gone from his voice and face. Cathiel felt a chill run down her spin.

"I don't know. After the purge came some sort of pestilence. It's hard to say who was killed by soldiers and who fell to disease."

"Isn't anything being done?" Cathiel asked, her voice appalled. Her father never would have left Highever's alienage to such deprivations. She felt sick when she realized that the elves of Highever had been under Howe's mercy for almost a year.

"Some men came from the Tevinter Imperium. They say they have magic that protects healthy people, and they've got a quarantine for the sick. They... they took Valendrian and your father, both. I'm sorry."

"Where's Valora?"

"She went to the hospice a week ago. They said... they said she had the plague. I didn't believe it, I mean, she was fine! But they took her to quarantine. I haven't seen her since."

"Where is this quarantine?"

"A house on the north side of the square. You can't miss it, Cousin, there's a huge crowd there now."

"I have to go."

"All right. It's good to see you again, Cousin."

"Jerath?" Cathiel asked.

"Pardon." Jerath turned back around. "Sorix, these are Cathiel Cousland, Teyrna of Highever, and Alistair Theirin, King of Ferelden. And this is Morrigan. Everyone, my cousin Sorix." He shrugged. "And if that completes introductions, we've got work to do."

"Maker's breath, Cousin." Sorix shook his head. "Try to leave a little of Denerim standing when you are done."

#

They followed Jerath towards the alieanage tree. A young woman was arguing with a group of other elves. Jerath headed towards her.

"Shianni? Is that really you?"

"Maker's breath! They said all the Grey Wardens died with the king. Everyone thought..." She looked like she'd seen a ghost. "Valendrian even held a funeral for you. Cousin, you have no idea... the things that happened after your wedding... I'm babbling, aren't I? I'm so happy to see you."

"Wedding?" Cathiel asked.

"You're married?" Alistair asked?

Morrigan raised an eyebrow. "Now this sounds like a curious tale."

"I was betrothed. It didn't end well." Jerath shrugged.

"And the story unfolds. How did this wedding come to naught?"

He gave them an annoyed look. "Imagine a storybook wedding: This was the opposite."

Alistair gave him a dubious look. "I... all right... that does sound bad."

"I got conscripted by the Wardens. We can talk about this some other time."

"So much has happened... It's good you're home." Shianni beamed at him.

"I saw Nesiara in Redcliff. She looked well. "

"Her family spent all of the dowry your father paid getting her set up there."

"I saw Soris."

"A lot of people blame him." She gestured angrily. "Can you believe that? They blame Soris as if he were responsible for what the new arl did to us."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't know? Oh-of course you don't. After you left, the regent appointed a new arl, Rendon Howe. The first thing this human did was march troops in here for a purge. Some people - - the stupid ones, mostly - - blame you and Soris for standing up to Vaughan."

Another elf called out to them. "It's a fact that Howe sent the soldiers here because of Vaughan's death, Shianni. Even you know that."

Shianni rounded on him. "It's a fact? Really? So we should take everything the humans say at face value? We're all lazy, vulgar, thieves then? That's what they say, isn't it?"

Jerath shrugged. "Howe is dead. Denerim goes through arls pretty quick lately."

"All these gifts, and it's not even my naming day." Shianni looked positively gleeful at the news.

A woman shook her fist at Jerath. "You just don't care how

much trouble you bring down on us, do you? Must be nice to be above your own people."

Shianni shook her fist right back. "Who brought Vaughan here in the first place? Tell me what we did to deserve that, and maybe I'll start caring what you think. Idiot. Elves wind up dead in the Market gutters every day over a wrong word, or a look, or nothing at all. That's how it's always been. We fight back, or we submit, but it doesn't change anything. I'm not about to shed a tear over that butcher Howe's death. If I could, I'd kick his grave marker and dance on his ashes." Cathiel smiled. She could get to like this woman.

Jerath smiled at her. "Don't hold back, tell me how you really feel."

Shianni just shook her head at him. "We'd be here all day. And I'd still have more to tell you, Cousin."

"What is going on here?"

"These people say they're here to help us. Funny thing, the people they 'help' all disappear."

The woman yelled at her. "That's not true, and you know it, Shianni! Both my sisters got protections from the plague, and they're fine!"

"What about your niece, though?" Shianni pointed a finger at her angrily. "And my Uncle Cyrion, and Valendrian? Where are they?"

"Wait, what's this about my father?" Jerath's voice became ice.

Shianni turned back to face him, running a hand through her hair in frustration. "The Tevinters quarantined your father yesterday. I told him not to go to the hospice. Not one elf they've taken in there has come out again. Who knows what's become of them?"

"I'm going in there."

"I knew you'd do something, Cousin! Maker watch over you." Shianni's face held relief, and more than a small trace of hero worship.

#

Cathiel caught up with him as he started for the building. "Shouldn't we take a moment..."

"I'm going in there."

Morrigan put a hand on her staff. "'tis time for the rampant slaughter then?"

Jerath jerked his head. "There is a way in around back."

Morrigan looked disappointed. "So, no rampant slaughter?"

"We go in, we come around from behind, where there is less chance of flammable innocent bystanders, and then we begin the rampant slaughter."

"Wonderful. For a moment there, you had me concerned."

Alistair and Cathiel exchanged a look. And then Alistair narrowed his eyes and nodded. He put a hand to his sword. "Let's kick these bastards out of Ferelden."

#

It occurred to Cathiel that if they did actually want to get the Tevinter's out of Ferelden at this point, they were going to need a broom. Or maybe a mop and bucket. A couple tried to demand they surrender. One almost managed to complete the sentence.

They stepped out into an alley. "What's this? Another shipment already? We weren't..." The guard narrowed his eyes. "Wait, you're no Tevinter. Who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Warden Jerath Tabris."

Cathiel blinked as the guard nearly wet himself. "Oh no! I've heard of you." He turned to his fellows, his face terrified. "Attack!"

Cathiel sighed as she dropped the last one with an arrow. "If he had heard of you, you'd think he'd have realized attacking was about the stupidest thing he could have done."

Jerath walked to the door and kicked it open.

#

"What is the meaning of this? We were told that there would be no interference from the authorities!"

"Do I look like one of the authorities?" Jerath asked.

"No. You look like an elf with more curiosity than sense. You will regret this, you know. Believe it or not, we have been given dispensation to do our business here." She smirked.

"The humans talk a great deal about how very wrong slavery is, but isn't it funny how quickly the smell of gold overcomes such ideals?"

"Slavers." Jerath narrowed his eyes.

"Do you have any idea how difficult it is to acquire new blood? These slaves will fetch an excellent price in the Imperium, and we are paying handsomely for this opportunity." She shrugged. "But enough. I am here to halt your slaughter, nothing more."

Jerath showed a hint of teeth. "Try." His blade burst into flames as Morrigan's staff glowed, and then he fell on the slavers. Cathiel picked off a couple archers, and Alistair dealt with a qunari mercenary.

Cathiel blinked. Jerath disemboweled the elf woman, then he simply sheathed his blade, and left her there, gasping and twitching on the floor. Morrigan gave the woman a satisfied smile, and followed Jerath. Alistair started to lift his blade for a mercy kill. "Leave her," Jerath said.

"Jerath..."

He turned, and she nearly recoiled from the look in his eyes.
"Leave. Her."

Alistair slowly sheathed his sword, and they followed him down the corridor.

#

A man in ornate robes looked up when they entered the room. The walls were lined with cages, packed so full of elves they could hardly move. "I see we are to have an interruption after all. I am Caladrius. And you, I assume, must be the Grey Warden I've heard so much about."

"I don't care who you are; You're going to die." Jerath continued moving forward. The rage in him now was entirely his own.

"Are you certain you wish to commit such a rash action, Grey Warden? Look around you. Surely we can reach some kind of... compromise?"

"That's not going to happen."

Caladrius sighed. "Pity. It looks as if we shall have to settle this the hard way, then. My apologies." He started to intone a spell. Jerath sent out energy of his own, and the spell dissipated in the mage's hand. The man gave him a surprised look. So, for that matter, did Alistair.

The rest of the guards moved to attack. His blades moved almost of their own accord, and the men that came his way simply died.

"Enough! Enough! It seems your reputation is an accurate one. I surrender."

"Surrender?" The man had to be joking. "I don't think so."

"Wait!" Caladrius backed away as Jerath continued to move towards him. "Here me out, kind Ser! Were I to... use the life force of the remaining slaves here, I could... augment your physical health a great deal! Allow me to leave this place alive and I would be more than happy to do this little service for you."

"Hmm, an interesting offer, if a tad messy." Morrigan observed. Blood magic.

"So..." Caladrius actually looked hopeful when Morrigan spoke. "Is my offer of interest to you? Yes?"

It interested him.

Just not the way the mage was hoping.

#

Cathiel barely realized Jerath had moved before his blade impaled Caladrius's abdomen. The dagger was in low, not an immediately fatal wound, but it served to keep the mage pinned to the wall. She didn't hear what Jerath said, but the

mage almost immediately tried to flee, slicing himself still further on the dagger. Jerath stepped away, and gave Morrigan an almost imperceptible nod of his head. The swamp witch began to gesture... Cathiel buried her face in Alistair's chest as he too turned away. The screams lasted thankfully only a few moments.

She raised her head, and saw Jerath walking back to where the cages were. He opened one, and the elves began to come out. An older elf, his face lined with the worry of years, approached Jerath.

"Son, is it really you? When they said all the Grey Wardens died at Ostager, I prayed they were wrong. Are you all right? What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let them hurt my family." She saw Jerath's face soften. It was hard to reconcile the boy being hugged by his father with the man she'd just seen slaughter his way through a slaver operation.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You're so much like your mother."

"Where's Valendrian?"

"They took him on the ships yesterday. He's probably halfway to Tevinter by now."

"But why? He's an old man."

"He's educated and well-spoken. They probably want him for a house servant." Cyrion raised his head and looked around. "This isn't a good place to talk. Come to the house. There's something I should give you." He left the house with the rest of the elves.

#

Cathiel watched as the older man left. "Your father." She looked again at the smoking remains of what had recently been a human being. "The woman out there?"

"Shianni. My father and her father were brothers."

Cathiel bit her lip. "Jerath, how did you become a Grey Warden?"

"I told you. Duncan conscripted me."

Next to her, Alistair spoke up. "Jerath?"

"Yes?"

"This doesn't happen again. Not on Ferelden soil. Ever."

Jerath nodded. "That's why."

"Why?" Alistair blinked at him.

"Why you need to be king." He turned his attention to Morrigan. "Do you have a few moments? I'd like to introduce you to my father."

Cathiel had seen Morrigan fight darkspawn. And demons. And dragons. She was pretty sure that was the first time she'd ever seen Morrigan look afraid.

#

His father fussed. He let him. "Let me get a look at you. Maker, don't they feed you Wardens? You're all skin and bones!"

Jerath smiled at him. "Did Soris mess anything up while you were gone?"

"Ha! You hear that, Soris?" Cyrion smiled and laughed. "No, everything's fine. If it looks a little messy, it's because I had to pull up the floorboards to get this out for you. It belonged to your mother. I think you should have it now."

Jerath looked down at the blade. He turned it over in his hands, and then nodded to himself. "Thank you."

"I know you'll do great things. You already do. So, tell me, who is your friend? Another Warden?"

Jerath smiled. "Father, this is Morrigan. She's a witch of the wilds."

"A who of the what?"

"An apostate, from the Korcari Wilds."

"I..." Cyrion's eyes widened. "I think I might need to sit down

for this."

#

They left to go find Alistair and Cathiel. "You... you took me to meet your father." Morrigan's voice was confused.

He laughed. "Morrigan, there is an archdemon on the loose, and we could easily all be dead or worse tomorrow. For now, I choose to live each day as though it were my last. So yes, I took you to meet my father."

"You said..."

"That you are worth my distraction. If I die tomorrow, I die a happy man, because right now, I have you." He kissed her, there under the vhenadah. He didn't care who saw them.

"You are an impossible man."

"You are just now figuring that out?" He led her to Alarith's store, where Soris had taken Cathiel to get more arrows.

"Well, well, look who's here." Alarith gave Jerath a pleased nod. "Welcome home! When we heard what happened at Ostagar, we assumed the worst. Should have known better." He wagged a finger at Jerath. "Would it kill you to let you know you're alive once in a while?"

"What's happened since I left?"

"They tore the place apart, cut down anyone who so much as

looked at them." Alarith sighed. "There were bodies stacked in the square for weeks."

Jerath shook his head. "Howe is dead, along with most of his soldiers."

"Son, didn't you learn the first time? I'm not saying you shouldn't have done that, but... well, you shouldn't have done that. It will only bring more trouble here. Things are bad enough."

"It won't," Alistair said firmly.

"Oh, and I suppose you can do something about it?" Alarith asked him. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"I am Alistair Therin." He took a breath. "King of Ferelden."

Alarith blinked, and then looked from Alistair to Jerath. His face paled, and then he slowly turned back to Alistair. "A pleasure to meet you, your Majesty."

"We should be getting back," Jerath said. "We still need to kick Loghain off the throne."

#

They turned over the papers they'd found to Eamon. Eamon looked troubled by the news. "I think we have enough evidence to turn the entire Landsmeet against Loghain."

"Good," Saitada said.

"I think everyone who is going to arrive in time has. I will call the Landsmeet for this evening. Make any final preparations necessary."

Saitada nodded to Eamon, and then turned to the others. "Get cleaned up, and then meet me in the study."

#

Saitada finished going over what the Landsmeet entailed, then sighed. "Jerath, according to what I've been told, it seems that the Landsmeet can be decided by a duel. For the obvious reason that most of us aren't Fereldan citizens, that means if it comes to that, you will have to represent us. Loghain isn't going to stand 50' away and let Cathiel pepper him with arrows, and, well, no offense Alistair..."

"None taken!" Alistair assured her.

"We should have our best warrior as champion. That would be you even without the citizenship issue."

"I remain your sword, Saitada."

She nodded. "Because I know certain of you, this is an order. Brehan and Leliana have arranged everyone's clothing. You will give them your full cooperation in this matter." She sighed, then gave Alistair a considering look. "I wish we had a crown for you."

Brosca bent, and rummaged in his bag. He pulled out a

crown. "This one work?"

"Where did you get that?" Saitada asked.

"Nicked it from Loghain."

"You... stole Loghain's crown?"

"Junior helped."

"I..." Saitada sighed. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Put that thing away before someone arrests you."

"I don't know, I think it might just send the proper message," Cathiel said, giggling.

54. Chapter 54

Cathiel adjusted the armor on Alistair, making sure the griffon was aligned front and center. He smiled down at her, bending slightly to kiss her forehead as she tightened the last strap.

"How do I look?"

"Like a warden." She kissed him. "And like a king. He does good work."

"Good." He gave her an admiring look. "I like the drakescale armor on you. Remind me to thank Leliana and Brehan for having it made." He bent to kiss her again when there was a polite knock on the open door. "Jerath! Hi! We were just..."

"My apologies for interrupting your royalnesses, but I found something that might complete your look." He handed Alistair a wrapped parcel.

"Ooh, present! And it's not even my name day." Alistair grinned boyishly as he began to unwrap the item. His hands started to shake as he stared at the item in disbelief. "This... this shield. It's Duncan's, isn't it? That's his crest..."

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "I thought maybe you might want it."

Alistair could barely get the words out. "Thank you. Truly, I had no idea his shield wasn't with him. This is perfect." He strapped the shield to his arm. "I don't know how else to express my gratitude." He grabbed Jerath, pulling the startled elf into a bear hug. "This means a great deal to me. I can't believe you remembered it at all..."

"Just take it." Cathiel had to hide a smile at the annoyance in Jerath's voice. "And let go of me."

"Oh. Of course." Alistair set him back on the ground. "Thank you again."

Jerath gave him a nod and left the room. Cathiel hesitated a moment, then followed.

"Thank you."

"He already said that."

"Now I'm saying it. I know... I know we haven't always been friendly to each other, or even nice, but... you've had our backs at every step. You even helped me get Howe. I owe you. We owe you."

Jerath stood there a moment, still and quiet. Cathiel waited, expecting a response, but after a couple heartbeats he finished walking away. She gazed after him a moment before returning to Alistair.

Saitada looked up as Alistair and Cathiel entered the room. She gave a low whistle. "You two look..."

Brosca chimed in "like a couple of royal badasses." Lenore and Zevran smacked him lightly on the back of the head simultaneously.

Cathiel grinned at Saitada. "You look like a royal badass yourself, Princess."

Leliana grinned, pride evident on her face as she made last minute adjustments to various people. "Overthrowing a regent calls for a certain amount of style."

Eamon entered a moment later, followed by Jerath and Morrigan. "Good. You are all here. Bring Alistair and join me at the palace as soon as you are ready, Commander."

Saitada nodded. "Sten, Oghren, and Zevran are going to be accompanying you, Eamon. Loghain has hired assassins before, and it seems he has only grown more desperate since."

Eamon nodded, and took his leave, followed by the others.

Saitada looked around the room. "Everyone ready?"

Leliana smiled triumphantly. "Dressed in our best and prepared to go to war."

Saitada grinned. "Good. Let's go."

#

Eamon stood on the balcony, Alistair and Cathiel flanking him. The blue cloaks, trimmed in silver with embroidery of griffons, served to mark them as wardens. Saitada stood in the lower area, with the rest of the wardens, in a similar cloak. On her brow was a silver circlet, more subtle than a crown, but marked with the sign of house Aeducan. No few of the lords stared when they saw it.

"My lords and ladies of the Landsmeet, Teyrn Loghain would have us give up our freedoms, our traditions, out of fear!" Eamon's voice rang out, strong and powerful. "He placed us on this path, yet we should place our destiny in his hands? Must we sacrifice everything good about our nation to save it?"

The angry muttering of the bannorn was cut off by the sound of Loghain's mocking applause. "A fine performance, Eamon, but no one here is taken in by it." Loghain shook his head. "You would attempt to put a puppet on the throne and every soul here knows it. The better question is, 'Who will pull the strings?'" He turned to look at Saitada. "Ah! And here we have the puppeteer."

She stepped forward. He gave her an accusing look as he continued. "Tell us, Warden: How will the Orlesians take our nation from us? Will they deign to send their troops, or simply issue their commands through this would-be prince?" He glared. "Where is the famous steadfastness of the dwarves? How much did it cost the empress to buy your loyalty?"

"The Blight is the threat here," she said. Her voice was almost maternal, patiently addressing a child throwing a tantrum. "Not Orlais!"

Alfstanna's voice was wry. "There are enough refugees in my bannorn now to make that abundantly clear."

Wulff rose. Cathiel had done her work well. "The south is fallen, Loghain! Will you let darkspawn take the whole country for fear of Orlais?"

Loghain's voice was apologetic. "The Blight is indeed real, Wulff. But do we need Grey Wardens to fight it?" He gestured at her again. "They claim that they alone can end the Blight, yet they failed spectacularly against the darkspawn at Ostagar, and they ask to bring with them four legions of chevaliers." He shook his head. "And once we open our borders to the chevaliers, can we really expect them to simply return from whence they came?" He glared down at her.

Time to change the field, and hit him at his weakest point. After all, why had the Orlesian occupation been so hated? "You allowed Rendon Howe to imprison and torture innocents."

The blow was solid. The Bannorn was rising. Sighard gestured angrily. "The Warden speaks truly! My son was taken under cover of night. The things done to him..." He slammed his fists down on the rail. "Some of them are beyond any healer's skill."

Loghain shook his head, and tried to regroup. "Howe was responsible for himself. He will answer to the Maker for any wrongs committed in this life. As must we all." He glared at her. "But you know that. You were the one who murdered him."

It was a mistake on his part, reminding the Bannorn who, exactly, had stopped Howe. Cathiel shifted, drawing attention to herself right on cue. The last of the Couslands. Loghain tried to draw them back. "Whatever Howe may have done, he should have been brought before the seneschal. There is no justice in butchering a man in his home."

"No?" Saitada's voice rang out, the voice of the royal house of Orzammar. "Then why did you send a blood mage to poison Arl Eamon?"

Loghain gave her a scornful look. "I assure you, Warden, if I were going to send someone, it would be my own soldiers. I would not trust to the discretion of an apostate."

"Indeed?" The ire in Alfstanna's voice couldn't have been more perfect than if Saitada had had Leliana coach her. The woman arched an eyebrow, her arms folded across her chest. "My brother tells a very different tale. He says you snatched a blood mage from the Chantry's justice. Coincidence?" Cathiel really hadn't been joking when she said Alfstanna would be a powerful ally.

The grand cleric stood up, and the eyes of every noble in the bannorn turned to her. She turned her stern eyes on Loghain.

"Do not think the Chantry will overlook this, Teyrn Loghain. Interference in a templar's sacred duties is an offense against the Maker."

He tried to wave her off. Another mistake. "Whatever I have done, I will answer for later. At the moment, however, I wish to know what this Warden has done with my daughter."

Beautiful. It was like watching him walk through the Deep Roads gate on his own. "What have I done?" She shook her head and smiled. "I've protected her from you."

He glared at her. "You took my daughter - our queen - by force, killing her guards in the process. What arts have you employed to keep her? Does she even still live?"

The only art that kept Anora was a lie. A suggestion of support. Anora stepped out from where she'd been, protected by the watchful eyes of Sten and Jerath. "I believe I can speak for myself." She walked into the center of the room, playing the role of queen beautifully. It was almost a shame. "Lords and ladies of Ferelden, hear me. My father is no longer the man you know. This man is not the hero of River Dane." She pointed to the balcony as she addressed the crowd. "This man turned his troops aside and refused to protect your king as he fought bravely against the darkspawn." She spread her hands. "This man seized Cailan's throne before his body was cold and locked me away so I could not reveal his treachery." She turned, reaching a hand out to Saitada. "I would have already been killed, if not for the Grey Wardens."

Saitada stepped to her side. "Loghain is not to be trusted."

He looked down at his daughter. Had he been any other man, she might have felt sorrow at the expression on his face. He'd lost. He knew it. "So the Warden's influence has poisoned even your mind, Anora?" He shook his head. "I wanted to protect you from this." He turned back to the Bannorn. "My lords and ladies, our land has been threatened before. It's been invaded, and lost, and won times beyond counting." He tried to rally them back. "We Fereldens have proven that we will never truly be conquered so long as we are united. We must not let ourselves be divided now. Stand with me, and we shall defeat even the Blight itself."

Bryland was the first to stand, as Cathiel had said. "South Reach stands with the Grey Wardens."

A noble whose name she didn't know stood. "The Warden helped me personally in a... family matter." She noted a bit of surprise on Eamon's face and made a mental note to ask about that later. Brosca was grinning.

Alfstanna's voice was firm. "Waking Sea stands with the Grey Wardens!"

Sighard's voice was still filled with rage. "Dragon's Peak supports the Wardens!"

Wulff sat as he spoke. "The Western Hills throw their lot in with the Wardens. Maker help us."

A quavering voice spoke up. "I stand by Loghain! We've no hope of victory otherwise."

The remaining voices failed to join him. "I stand with the Wardens." From the other side of the room. "The Blight is coming; we need the Grey Wardens!"

She counted as the last of the voices died away. Six more than Cathiel had predicted. Her companions had done their work well. "The Landsmeet is against you, Loghain. Step down gracefully." She really hoped he wouldn't.

"Traitors! Which of you stood against the Orlesian emperor when his troops flattened your fields and raped your wives?" He turned and gestured at Eamon. "You fought with us once, Eamon. You cared about this land once. Before you got too old and fat and content to even see what you risk." He shook his head. "None of you deserve a say in what happens here! None of you have spilled blood for this land the way I have!" His voice was almost a snarl. "How dare you judge me!"

His soldiers entered. She was rather amused at how casually Jerath and Sten stepped aside to let the soldiers pass. Perfect. "Call off your men and we'll settle this honorably." Let the Bannorn see the wardens as the peacemakers. The diplomats. Alistair's reign would begin with honor.

Loghain narrowed his eyes. "Then let us end this."

#

Loghain stood on one side of the room, flanked by his soldiers. "When we first met at Ostagar, I would never have thought so. But Ostagar seems like it happened in another lifetime, to someone else. A man is made by the quality of his enemies. Maric told me that once. I wonder if it's more a compliment to you or me. Enough. Let the Landsmeet declare the terms of the duel."

Alfstanna's voice rose above the crowd. It was good that woman was an ally. "It shall be fought according to tradition: a test of arms in single combat until one party yields. And we who are assembled will abide by the outcome."

"Will you face me yourself," Loghain stared at her. "Or have you a champion?"

"Jerath stands as the Warden's champion."

She saw the Bannorn react. A lovely side effect. She knew she was sending the Warden's best. But the Bannorn saw an elf, young enough not to have his full growth. They saw an insult. A few shifted uncertainly. It wasn't enough to beat Loghain. Killing him wasn't enough. She wanted him destroyed.

Alistair and Cathiel were standing by Eamon. She went to join them. Alistair nodded to her. It was almost over.

#

Cathiel tried to appear confident as the nobles made a circle

around Loghain and Jerath. Loghain stood more than a foot taller than Jerath, and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds before taking into account the differences in their armor. Jerath had chosen splintmail, and for all it was made of dragon skin it looked like naught more than paper next to Loghain's full plate. The elf was fast, true, but it mattered for nothing if all Loghain had to do was land a single blow.

The combatants circled each other for a moment. Loghain drew his blade, tapping it lightly against his shield. Jerath made no move towards his own weapons. With a shout, Loghain charged. A half heart-beat before Loghain reached him, Jerath spun to the side, drawing his weapon with one hand as the other shoved against Loghain's sword arm, knocking the bigger man off balance. Before Loghain could recover, Jerath came around his back and slashed Starfang into the gap between Loghain's arm and shield, cutting and damaging the straps.

As the two faced off again, Loghain's shield hung askew. Though it still provided some modicum of protection, its movements were slowed. At least, not without knocking himself dangerously off balance and providing his much faster opponent with all the opportunity he would need. Again, Jerath went still, waiting. Loghain glanced at his shield, shifting his arm to try to mitigate the damage done. He moved in, this time cautiously. Jerath let Loghain take a few steps, and then swiftly moved in to meet him. Loghain lifted his shield to block, and Jerath shifted his own motion, coming around to the side of the shield. The damaged strap prevented Loghain from

being able to shift the shield's position in time to prevent Jerath's blow to the side of the knee.

Cathiel smiled. The combination of shield damage and the blow to the leg slowed the bigger man considerably. The more lightly armored Jerath would be able to dance in and out practically at his leisure. From the frustrated look on Loghain's face, he'd obviously come to the same conclusion. Again, the big man charged, but as Jerath started to move, Loghain shifted his weapon of choice from sword to shield in a movement clearly intended to simply pummel his smaller opponent to the ground. It would have worked to, except as Loghain struck, Jerath dodged inside the shield, instead of away from it, moving in close enough that the larger man could bring neither shield nor sword to bear.

Jerath plunged his dagger into Loghain's side, drawing a hiss of pain from the human. He then pushed off, using Loghain himself to provide leverage as he batted Loghain's sword out of his way, again putting distance between the two. Blood dripped from the opening in Loghain's armor. Loghain shifted his shield, obviously expecting the elf to close in again and finish it. Jerath's face never changed expression. He began to circle Loghain, who turned to keep the elf in front of him. Each step took nothing from Jerath, but it was clear that the injuries had taken their toll on Loghain.

Cathiel whispered to Alistair. "What is he waiting for?"

"I don't know." He blinked. "Neither does Saitada."

Loghain began to move towards the elf, slowly at first, before shifting to a charge from a closer position. Jerath caught Loghain's blade on his dagger, redirecting the force rather than blocking it and letting Loghain's own momentum carry him out of position. Starfang whipped out in a blow, tearing a gash in Loghain's breastplate. Jerath completed a spin, bringing Starfang in again, this time completing what his first blow had started and demolishing Loghain's shield entirely. The dagger came up and penetrated the shoulder of Loghain's sword-arm.

Loghain fell, landing on one knee. He tried to lift his sword, but the blade nearly slipped from his fingers entirely.

"I underestimated you, Warden. I thought you were like Cailan, a child wanting to play at war. I was wrong. There's a strength in you I've not seen anywhere since Maric died. I yield."

"I accept your surrender."

#

Saitada's mouth dropped open. That was... not supposed to happen.

Alistair shook his hands and gestured. "I didn't just hear you say that. You're going to let him live? After everything he's done?! Kill him, already!"

Riordan stepped out of the crowd. "Wait! There is another option! The teyrn is a warrior and general of renown. Let him

be of use. Let him go through the joining."

"You want to make him a Warden?" Saitada stared at him. "Why?"

"There are eight of us in all of Ferelden. And there are... compelling reasons to have as many Wardens on hand as possible to deal with the archdemon."

Anora was quick to grasp the straw. "The Joining itself is often fatal, is it not? If he survives, you gain a general. If not, you have your revenge. Doesn't that satisfy you?"

"Absolutely not!" Alistair said. "Riordan, this man abandoned our brothers and then blamed us for the deed! He hunted us down like animals. He tortured you! How can we simply forget that?"

Brosca glanced at Jerath. "Maybe Riordan has a point, we could put him through the Joining."

"Joining the Wardens is an honor, not a punishment! Name him a Warden and you cheapen us all! I will not stand next to him as a brother. I won't!" Alistair drew back his shoulders.

"Not all of us have spotless honor, you know," Jerath said quietly.

Alistair shook his head. "Some things can't be undone or forgiven. This goes way past having spotless honor, we aren't talking about a minor hiccup in his past! I didn't want to be

king. I still don't. But... if that's what it takes to see Loghain get justice, then I'll do it. I'll take the crown."

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "Then I hereby invoke the Grey Warden's Right of Conscription. I remove this prisoner into my custody."

"I..." Anger shown on every inch of Alistair's face. "You!"

Saitada starred at Jerath before putting a hand on Alistair's arm. "It is his right, Alistair."

Alistair glared down at her. "Fine. You want Loghain in the Grey Wardens so badly. Then I'll be leaving the Wardens to take the throne."

"You can't just stop being a Warden, Alistair."

"Watch me."

Cathiel spoke up before the argument could continue. "This can be discussed later. We are keeping the Landsmeet waiting."

"Right."

#

Eamon strode towards them, and turned his gaze on Saitada. "Warden Commander, as the arbiter of this dispute, what is your decision? Who will lead Ferelden?"

Saitada stood, again every inch the princess. "Alistair will be king, and Teryna Cousland will rule beside him." Anora's face went black with fury.

Eamon's voice held a small note of satisfaction as he turned to her. "Anora, the Landsmeet has decided against you. You must now swear fealty to the king, and relinquish all claim to the throne for yourself and your heirs."

Anora all but spat at him. "If you think I will swear that oath, Eamon, you know nothing of me."

Jerath gave Loghain the barest nudge with his foot. Loghain glanced at the elf, who gave a pointed look towards the guards, and Saitada saw realization dawn in his eyes. Loghain turned to his daughter. "Anora, be reasonable."

Anora turned towards him, and her eyes widened slightly. "Very well, Eamon. I will make the oath."

#

Jerath helped Loghain to his feet and the two started to follow Riordan. Morrigan followed a few paces behind. Saitada turned to the others. "Go back to Arl Eamon's estate, finish gathering whatever supplies we need for the trek back to Redcliff." She sent a furious glance in the direction Jerath had gone. "Alistair...I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault."

Saitada gave a jerky nod of her head before stalking off after Jerath. Cathiel hesitated a moment, then followed.

"Somebody's about to have his ears clipped." Brosca shook his head.

Lenore stared. "What...what was he thinking, pulling that stunt?"

Brehan frowned. "I have this revolutionary idea... we could...you know... ask him."

Brosca snorted. "Yeah, because the guy has always been so forthcoming with answers thus far."

Wynne shook her head. "Enough, now is not the time."

#

Riordan and Jerath had helped Loghain remove his damaged armor before Saitada caught up with them. Morrigan began casting the healing spell as Saitada stalked into the room. Riordan stood by a small altar, mixing something into a silver chalice.

Saitada shoved a finger into his chest. "Jerath, what the hell was that."

"Commander, if you wait just a few more minutes, we can find out if this conversation is even going to be necessary."

"It's going to be necessary regardless," she said, shoving him

back a step.

Riordan tried to intercede. "Commander..."

She held up a hand. "I'm talking to Jerath. I do not desire input from anyone else in this room."

"Then let us speak elsewhere." He gestured for Saitada to follow him.

They had barely managed to get out of the room before Saitada grabbed his arm. "I repeat, what the hell was that?"

"The Right of Conscription. You may not be familiar with it, as I believe you joined voluntarily."

Cathiel stepped next to Saitada. "This is not the time for your games, Jerath."

"It isn't a game, Cathiel. It never has been. Grey Wardens do what they must." He shook his head. "You'd have preferred to execute Anora?"

"Execute... why would I execute Anora?"

Jerath raised his eyebrow. "Because your alternative would have been to have her raise a rebellion against you. For her to whisper to all the nobles that if she were on the throne, their people would have their farms back by now, that the supply routes would be open, that the refugees would have homes. And they'd listen, because they'd want to believe it and to believe that if she were back on the throne they would have

some modicum more power of their own." He gave Saitada a steady look. "Am I right?"

Cathiel stared when she saw Saitada sigh and nod. "But she did take the oath."

"Of course she did." He turned to look at her. "Just as you became a warden. Because she too, loves a father who saw the axe coming for his child. And she, like you, will do her duty. I've given you a hostage to gain you an administrator who knows the ins and outs of Ferelden and because her father raised her to know her duty, will serve you well. I suggest you acknowledge Anora as Teryna of Gwaren as soon as possible."

Cathiel's jaw dropped open, and she tried several times to speak.

Saitada shook her head. "An admirable thought, but we still can't trust Loghain."

Jerath shrugged. "How many of our allies did we start out able to trust? For that matter, how many of our allies can we trust now? If he moves against us, I will kill him then."

"Yes." She tapped his breastplate. "You will. If he survives the joining, he is your responsibility."

"I suppose he is." He twitched a shoulder. "Was there anything else?"

"Just this..." She gazed up at him. "Pull another stunt like that, and I'm going to make you eat my shield, got it?"

"Understood, Commander."

#

Morrigan looked up from where she had finished closing the last of Loghain's wounds. Loghain followed her gaze.

"Everything settled?"

Jerath nodded. "Riordan, are you ready?"

"Yes." He handed Loghain the chalice. "You are called upon to submit yourself to the taint for the greater good. From this moment forth, you are a Grey Warden."

"I... understand."

#

Loghain was rather surprised when he woke up. The elf sat in a chair across the room, watching quietly.

"I passed your test. Fate has a twisted sense of humor, it seems. I suppose you think I'm some sort of monster. More so since I survived your ritual: you keep striking at me, and I just refuse to die decently."

"I don't think you're a monster."

Loghain sighed. "You're a poor liar, you know. It's kind of you

to say so, all the same. We must settle things between us somehow or other, or none of us will get any work done. So, what will it be?"

The elf twitched a shoulder. "Saitada wishes you to know that if you act against us in any way, you'll be executed immediately. She's made you my responsibility. We're going to have to work together."

Loghain remembered the fury on the dwarf's face when she'd confronted the elf. "Is that punishment meant for me or for you? And just like that, we're allies? I can't imagine it's so simple. I don't know what concession you want from me, Warden. I expect my word will not satisfy you."

"You are a Grey Warden now, too, you know."

"Indeed, I'd almost forgotten that. Thank you for the reminder. I think it's time we got to the point here: What do you want from me? I can't imagine you spared my life in the Landsmeet by accident. You have some plan in mind."

"You tell me: What do you want?"

"What I want? What an odd question..." Loghain shook his head, and stared at the other man. It was several moments before he answered. "I want to ride back to Denerim and sit in the war room and find no empty chairs at the table. I want to lose nothing else. I want a line, clearly drawn, that I can defend. I want an end to this war. All of this can rightly be called my fault. Whether or not you can do better remains to

be seen." He met the younger man's eyes. "But if you can make this the end, Warden, I will follow you. I swear it."

Jerath rose, and picked up the items on the table. He handed them to Loghain. "The sword is called the Keening Blade. It's been enchanted to be especially potent against the Darkspawn. The shield... The shield I think you might know."

He stared at it in disbelief, then took it reverantly. His fingers traced the heraldry. "Maric's shield. Where did you?"

"It seems he lost it in the Deep Roads some time previous. An enterprising merchant found it, and it made its way into my hands." Jerath shrugged. "And it seems I rendered your previous shield somewhat beyond repair."

"That you did." He looked up. The elf in front of him couldn't be more than seventeen. He doubted the young man even had his full growth on him. "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"From a Night Elf." Loghain started at the young man's answer. "You've been unconscious for about three hours now. The soldiers are preparing to march. We can talk more later."

55. Chapter 55

"Which one?"

Jerath looked up at Loghain. "Which one what?"

"Which Night Elf taught you to fight?"

"Adaia Tabris." Jerath twitched a shoulder. "My mother."

"Adaia Tabris was your mother? Yes... I see it now... in your eyes." Loghain smiled in memory. "She was quite the firebrand."

"Yes."

"I imagine she's quite proud to see what you've become."

"She's been gone a long time now."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He remembered the young woman, her long knives moving faster than the eye could see. They'd stood back to back at the Silver Creek, her knives protecting him while he fired arrows. It seemed another life.

"Are you?"

Something in the way the young man had asked the question

made it a dangerous one. "Of course."

"You realize, were she still alive, she would have been living in the Alienage? There were a few other veterans there, as well."

"I... There is no saving the alienage. Damage from the riots has yet to be repaired. There are bodies still rotting in their homes. It is not a place I would send my worst enemy. There is no chance of holding it if the Blight comes to Denerim. Despite what you may think, Warden, I have done my duty. Whatever my regrets may be for the elves, I have done what was needed for the good of Ferelden."

"Of course. You did your duty, as expected." Jerath finished polishing his axe, and went to work on his sword. "Did you need anything else?"

"No, I suppose not..." His life was, quite literally, in this young man's hands. And he still wasn't sure why Jerath had been willing to stand against his friends on Loghain's behalf. He'd have expected the elf to hold the most anger for him, and yet, the boy had even been kind. He looked at this shield strapped to his arm. Lost in Ortan Thaig, over two decades ago. Handed to him by Adaia's son.

Jerath looked down at his sword, frowning at the metal. "It will take a few days for the armies to gather at Redcliffe." He glanced over at the parcel beside him. "Saitada ran into one of Cailan's guards, who says there may be information of use back in the king's camp at Ostagar."

"I see..."

"In the morning, you and I are heading out to retrieve it."

So the dwarf was not forgiving after all. "Would it not be cleaner to simply execute us?"

"She seems to think us all remaining together is going to end in bloodshed." Jerath twitched a shoulder. "After we are done there, we are going to make a quick trip into the deep roads for Shale. She's coming with us. We will meet back in Denerim, then be at Redcliffe by the time the Dalish and the dwarves have arrived."

"You are being unrealistically optimistic about our chances of success."

Jerath sheathed his blade, and stood. "Shale and Morrigan will be coming with us."

"I stand by my previous remark." Loghain shook his head. "There is nothing left in Ostagar that could possibly be worth the risk. This is a fool's errand."

"That would be why we are going." Jerath shrugged. "Do you trust me, Loghain?"

"I..." Loghain frowned. "That is an odd question for you to ask. Certainly you do not trust me."

"You swore you would follow me. I am willing to trust that oath. I am asking if you trust me."

Loghain starred at the smaller man. "Yes." He was surprised to hear the word pass his lips.

Jerath nodded. "This trip is necessary, though not for the reasons Saitada thinks."

"You know something she does not?"

Jerath turned his eyes to the south. "I know it is necessary for you to return to Ostagar, and for me to be there when you do."

#

Saitada watched the small party leave. She shook her head. Sten fell into step beside her as they walked back to Eamon's manor. She stopped, and looked up at him. "Was he right?" She gestured towards the gate Jerath had led his party through. "I don't have a clear view from my angle."

"I believe that he is an apt pupil, and that you have taught him well."

"I just wish I understood why he did it."

"He believed it to be his role. I believe he acted because he knew you could not. I have yet to observe him stray from his purpose, either as warden, or as your second in command."

"He isn't my second."

"Is he not the one you send, when you cannot go yourself?"

She sighed, then nodded. "I never really thought of it. I just know I can count on him to do what needs be done."

"As he did at the Landsmeet."

"You agree with what he did."

"The Qunari do not waste. Killing Loghain would have been a waste."

"I suppose there is wisdom in that. I just don't like it." She looked to where Brehan and Leliana were talking with a revered mother. "There is some wisdom in the Chant, you know."

"Then someone should release it into the wild. It is in danger of dying out."

That got a smile. "Good one, were you saving that up?"

"No, that came to me just now." He looked pleased to have gotten her to smile. Then he turned his gaze to where the chantry stood. "Tell me: Where is the wisdom in crying for a derelict god to save you?"

She leaned back on the gate, and looked up at him. "True, we have to save ourselves."

He leaned on the wall next to her. "My people have a tale: A great ashkaari during his travels came upon a village in the desert. There, he found the houses crumbling. The earth so dry and dead that the people tied themselves to each other

for fear a strong wind would carry the ground out from under their feet. Nothing grew there except the bitter memory of gardens. The ashkaari stopped the first man he saw, and asked, 'what happened here?' 'Drought came. And the world changed from prosperity to ruin,' the man told him."

"So what happened?"

"'Change it back.' The ashkaari replied. The villager became angry then, believing the ashkaari mocked him, for no one could simply change the world on a whim. To which the ashkaari answered, 'then change yourself. You make your own world.'"

"I suppose you have a point."

"Believe in whatever you like: absent creators, or whimsical gods. Follow prophets, or ashkaari, or omens in the earth and sky. You will find wisdom only if you seek it."

#

Morrigan frowned. "Their spells are more potent than they should be. This has the feel of something directed, not merely random happenstance."

"This is how they entered Ishal the first time. Digging a pit like this, it took time." Jerath walked along the rim of the pit.

Loghain shook his head. "How could they have known the battle plan would relied on Ishal? That did not become part of

the plan until that very day. I had initially planned to use mages, back when I thought the plan had a chance of success."

Jerath bent, looking down into the pit. "Interesting that they would know Ishal would be the signal... but not that the signal would go unanswered."

Loghain sighed. "We could not flank something that had no flank. Had there been any chance of reaching Calian at Ostagar... I would have."

"I believe that you believe that, for what it's worth." He turned the sword he'd picked up over in his hands. "Interesting."

"What is interesting about that blade?" Morrigan asked.

"It's not the blade, exactly." He held it out as if testing the balance as they started out of the tower. "They strung Cailan up like a trophy."

"And?"

"This is Duncan's blade. He died beside Cailan. Why string up the king, but not the commander of the Grey? The commander of the grey, at least, they could reasonably recognize?"

"That is..." She stopped, and then frowned thoughtfully. "That is an interesting notion. Perhaps they had another use for Duncan's body?"

"I thought Darkspawn were mindless." Loghain kicked a genlock into the pit.

"They are, near enough. At least they are supposed to be." He put the blades in his pack, and started moving. He stopped at Cailin's body. "It does not seem right, to let them have their trophy." He turned to Loghain. "Help me cut him down."

""You intend to burn him?"

"We don't have time for that. I heard wolves, earlier. That will serve to keep him from the darkspawn as well as any pyre."

#

They came across a mage protecting a group of refugees on their way back to Redcliff. Brosca blinked, then took a second look at the mage.

"You?" He stared at Lenore. "It's you, again." He glanced at the others. "Please don't do anything to me. I've only been trying to help."

One of the refugees moved to stand in front of Jowan. "Don't be scaring good Master Levyn. He's saved us three times over!"

Lenore smiled. "Stay your current course, 'Levyn'. Redemption suits you."

He returned the smile. "Th-thank you, Warden. I will. I swear to you." He glanced at the others. "Everyone, let's move. The

Warden has more... important matters to attend to."

#

Loghain took the cup Jerath handed him. The swamp witch was engrossed in reading a tome, while the golem took up watch some distance from the camp.

"I'm not sure what good these papers will do. Celene's plot died with Cailan"

"Assuming that was the full intent of her plot."

Loghain nodded. Orlesians plotted the way most people breathed. "A fair point."

Jerath sipped from his own mug. He glanced over to where Morrigan had busied herself with the grimore, then asked Loghain, "Was Ostagar what Flemeth meant when she warned Maric about you?"

Loghain's eyes widened. "How could you..."

"She told Maric that if he kept you close, you would betray him, each time worse than the last."

"And how do you know this?"

"She told me. Before I killed her."

"You... killed Flemeth?" He stared at the elf. Even having fought him, having seen him cut his way past ogres, he had

trouble believing that.

"Yes." He twitched a shoulder. "Though I doubt it took."

"I threatened her once. A tree grabbed me."

"No trees. She did turn into a very large dragon though."

Loghain frowned. "You'd think something like that would sound unbelievable." He gazed into the fire. "She told Maric that sometimes, vengeance changes the world." He shook his head. "She knew things she couldn't possibly have..."

"She knew I'd come to kill her. I believe she expected me." He gave a twitch of his shoulder. "She told me there were many, many reasons to kill her, more than I could possibly know. She also said that this Blight's threat was greater than we realized. It was she who saved us from the Tower of Ishal."

"Why did you kill her then?"

"Morrigan is her daughter."

"I see."

"No, I don't quite believe you do, but no matter. Flemeth didn't seem to take it personally, in any event." Jerath drained his tea. "But then, I believe that's because the entire thing played out to her expectations. She was expecting us when we first came to the wilds. She gave us the treaties. She even seemed to know that Jory would not survive the joining."

"Jory?"

"A knight, from Redcliff. He... declined to participate in the ritual. Duncan killed him."

"I see."

"She asked me what I believed."

"What did you tell her?"

"That believed or not, some things must be accepted." He frowned. "It appeared to be the answer she was looking for. She played herself off as a madwoman, but I believe she may have been saner than any of us."

"She asked Maric to give her a promise and to never speak of it. Did she ask the same of you?"

"Yes."

"Did you agree?"

"Yes."

"Is that why we are here, then?"

"Maybe."

Loghain smiled ruefully. "She warned Maric the blight was coming. And that he would not live to see it."

"That would explain why he let the Wardens back into Ferelden." Jerath refilled his cup. "It seems we are all dancing to Flemeth's tune."

"A discouraging notion, to say the least." Loghain frowned. "Do you trust Morrigan then?"

Jerath laughed. "I trust Morrigan about half as far as I can throw her."

"Indeed. Were he fool enough to trust me, I would not enjoy his company so much." Morrigan said, not bothering to look up from her tome.

Loghain shook his head. "I suppose you disapprove of my being here as well."

Morrigan laughed. "No, indeed. You are a vast improvement over Alistair. That, however, is not saying a great deal."

They sat in silence for a moment, looking over the ruins. Loghain cast his senses about, experimenting a bit with his newfound abilities. He could sense the difference between the wardens and the darkspawn. The Dalish elf was able to not only manage that, but to tell one warden from another, even somehow managing to track them by the sense of their passing.

"Would it have been so bad?" Jerath asked quietly, pulling Loghain out of his reverie.

"Would what have been so bad?"

"Cailan wedding Celene."

"Yes."

"Do you hate Orlais so much?"

"Hate doesn't describe it. I've seen painted, masked lords beat an old farmer to death with riding crops. To this day, I don't know why. Is that hate? I saw good, sensible men fight armored chevaliers with nothing - - no weapons, no armies, not even hope of success - - to see the occupation end. Is that hate?"

"It seems more personal than just that."

"They made me watch while they held my mother down and raped her, then slit her throat when they were finished." Loghain found himself surprised that he was telling the elf this. "They took whatever they wanted, and killed if you dared object. And Cailan would have put us back under their bootheels."

Jerath stared out over the ruins. "Adaia Tabris was a warrior, trained under the tutelage of Ferelden's greatest general. It's possible she could have defeated the men who attacked her..." His eyes grew distant as he stared into the fire. "But one held a knife to her son's throat. When they were done, they bashed her skull with a rock. Blood made their hands slippery enough to pull free, and dive beneath the docks.

Through the middens and junk piles, tunnels too small for them to follow. I've seen lordlings drag screaming girls away from their families, then two days later fished the girl's body out of the water by the docks. I've seen a few voices finally manage to make themselves heard for the injustice, and seen friends and family slaughtered in retaliation. I've walked through an orphanage where children were cut down in their beds. It's hate. And pretty words about it being in the past won't change it when it will only happen again tomorrow. And it wasn't done by Orlesians, or some foreign power. It was done on Maric's watch, by his soldiers. It was done on Anora's watch, by her guards. It was done by the man you put in power, Loghain, to cause the consequences you used to justify selling my kin into slavery to furnish your little war. An act my allies, the people in this world I'd even go so far as to consider my friends, considered so petty it wasn't even worth bringing up at the Landsmeet. Adaia Tabris saved your life, Loghain. And it was Maric's guardsmen who killed her, who threw her body on a midden heap. She won the battle of Twin Hills for you and was murdered not by Orlesians, Loghain. Fereldens. Then your Tevinters came to sell Adaia's husband into slavery. I understand your hatred, Loghain. I know the rage. The part I don't understand is your persistent delusion that Fereldens are any different."

"I..."

"I didn't choose to join the Wardens either, Loghain. The words I used to conscript you are the same words Duncan used to conscript me. I slaughtered my way through the Arl of

Denerim's estate. I used poison. I cut throats. I tore Vaughan's head off his shoulders. And I brought home the women he'd stolen, the women he'd raped, the body of the woman he murdered. That's when the guards, Anora's guards, finally decided to pay attention to what was happening. They came to the alienage with torches, prepared to burn down homes to find out who did it. So I took responsibility. And then Duncan conscripted me, right out from under the guard's noses. Denied that revenge for some pathetic human lordling, the guards came back later. Torches, plague, enough children slaughtered to tear the veil and give rage demons form. Bodies still rotting in their homes, an entire people abandoned to a place with no chance of being held against the Blight." He crushed the cup in his hands.

Loghain stared at him in silence. Shale was still off in the darkness somewhere, likely not even aware of the confrontation at the campfire. He was surprised to realize that Jerath had not been shouting at all. In fact, the young man's voice had never changed from his normal, calm speaking voice. The swamp witch still appeared engrossed in her book, though he doubted she was ignoring the events as thoroughly as it appeared.

"I... why did you conscript me? It can't be for the reasons you gave the dwarf."

"You haven't figured that out yet?"

"No..." An idea came to him, as far fetched as it seemed. "The swamp witch..."

Jerath removed the daggers from his boots and set them on the rock next to him. "My mother once told me that in all the world, there were only two humans she'd ever held any respect for. And that it always amused her that both had given her the same gift ... a knife." He held up the first dagger, inlaid with a griffin on the handle. "This one was given to her by Duncan. And so I accepted my conscription." He held up the second, its hilt carved to resemble a mabari. "This one... you recognize, I suppose. And I conscripted you." He replaced the knives. "The swamp witch told me that life is full of circles and choices, and that little is as chance as it seems."

"Your mother didn't start out a night elf. Her brother was one, and she just sort of attached herself to the unit, running our errands. Bringing tea."

"My mother made you tea..."

"Yes."

"And you... drank it...?"

"These were dark and troubled times. Believe it or not, I'd tasted worse." Loghain smiled fondly in memory. "She was there when we were planning the battle of Twin Hills. We needed a distraction, something to keep the chevaliers from chasing us down on horseback after we cut the supply line. I had the night elves take position. The plan was they would pepper the chevalier's with arrows, cut down their numbers that way." He shook his head. "They were unneeded. Your mother snuck into the chevalier's camp, just another young elf

in servant's clothes. She cut the lines of their horses and set a tent on fire to start a stampede. We took the supply caravan with almost no casualties." He smiled. "I didn't know whether to spank her or give her a medal. So I gave her that dagger , told the others she was my personal servant and told her she was my new bodyguard. That kept her out of... most of the trouble."

"She'd been back in the alienage a year when Duncan came. Valendrian, our Hahren, arranged a marriage for her to keep her out of the wardens."

"Arranged?"

"Most elfish marriages are arranged. My own was."

"You are married."

"No. I was conscripted. The women Vaughan carried off... that was at what was to have been the wedding. It never took place."

"I see. Still, I'm surprised Adaia agreed to an arranged marriage."

"She wasn't happy about the idea, at first, she told me. Then she met my father. Duncan thought about inviting her to join the wardens, but decided against it." Jerath met Loghain's eyes. "Perhaps he made a mistake there. Would you have listened to Adaia?"

"No." Loghain sighed. "I may have treated her with more respect than I did Duncan, but I would not have heeded her warnings either. I knew the Darkspawn were a threat, but I still considered Orlais the greater threat."

"And now?"

"The dragon, the one in our dreams... that is the archdemon?"

"Yes."

Loghain couldn't quite prevent a shudder. "Feeling it, being so close to this many darkspawn... this is why you brought me back to Ostagar."

"Yes."

"It's not just Ferelden at risk, anymore. It's all of Thedas..."
Loghain frowned. "What do they do, with the ones they drag off alive?"

"The men are the lucky ones. They get eaten. The women get turned into broodmothers, darkspawn that make more darkspawn."

"You know this?"

"I've seen it." He actually shuddered. "A dwarven woman, named Laryn. The darkspawn corrupted her, made her eat her own kinfolk, including her husband."

"Did you..."

"I killed her. She almost returned the favor."

"There were... women, among the soldiers at Ostagar."

"And among the few servants that remained, yes. Genlocks come from dwarven broodmothers, hurlocks from human. The shrieks come from elfish broodmothers. It's likely the ogres are a result of Qunari broodmothers, but we haven't found any yet to confirm."

"That is... a profoundly disturbing thing to consider."

"Hespith set it to poetry."

"Hespith?"

"A dwarven woman, in the process of being turned into a broodmother. I killed her too."

"I..."

"The darkspawn come from us. Each village they take, each alienage, each group of refugees, they can make more broodmothers, increase their numbers still further. Once they take Ferelden, they will take Thedas."

"We must stop them."

"Welcome to the Grey Wardens, Loghain."

#

Brehan shattered the genlock's skull. Despite being mortally wounded, the wolf locked her jaw onto the emissary, bearing the creature down. The emissary stabbed the wolf in the side again, and the wolf went still. Brehan avenged her a moment later by smashing the thing's skull.

Leliana looked around. "Was that all of them?"

"Scouts or stragglers," Brehan said. He cast his senses. "No more in my range." He started to turn towards her, then heard a sound. He walked in it's direction. "Ah, so that's why she didn't run."

"What?"

"The wolf." He bent, picking up the pup. It couldn't have been more than a few weeks old. "She was protecting her baby."

"Oh, it's adorable." Leliana petted it gently. "We aren't going to leave it, are we?"

It started licking his face. Leliana giggled. He sighed. "No, I suppose we aren't."

#

They were only a day out from Redcliffe when Loghain brought Jerath a cup of the tea. "I am... sorry."

"Oh?"

"For Adaia. Please believe that if I had known, I would have

seen justice done for her." She'd saved his life. He never even knew she had a son.

"The last two of the guards were at Ostagar. I found one." Jerath smiled at the memory. "The other was in the royal guard. Justice, such as it is, was done."

"I see."

"Made no difference, either way. No matter how many you kill in the name of justice, ashes will not become flesh, and the dead do not return. I could bring down a horde to ravage Denerim, and it would change nothing. Hate is a childish thing, Loghain. We no longer have the luxury of being children."

#

"Are you really going to keep that mangy thing?" Brosca asked.

Brehan raised an eyebrow at him. "We let you keep Zevran."

"Zevran doesn't bite."

"Um..." Lenore started to say.

"And he doesn't have fleas."

"I think it's adorable," Lenore said, reaching over to pat the puppy. "What are you going to call him?" She bounced excitedly. "You could call him dragon."

"No, he's too adorable to be a dragon," Leliana said.

"Whiskers."

"You can't call a wolf 'Whiskers'. It's beneath his dignity," Lenore replied.

Brehan just sighed as the two began to run through names.

"Now you've gone and done it, Songbird. They are going to agree on something stupid, and that poor mutt is going to be stuck with it."

"Emma shem..."

"Emma shem'nan, your revenge is swift. And yet, I'm still waiting."

56. Chapter 56

Jerath arrived back in Denerim two days after they did. He wisely left Loghain behind when coming to give his report. After he'd handed everything to Eamon, Saitada fell into step with him as they went downstairs. "I don't owe you an apology," she said.

"I never believed you did."

"Why did you recruit Loghain?"

"I told you why."

"Now I want the rest of the reason."

He shook his head. "Because while it's Alistair's country, it's Loghain's army. Their general will fight alongside them, and so they will fight for Alistair. Because I believe you would have regretted manipulating Anora's execution for the rest of your life, all the more because you told yourself it was justice for Duncan. Because wardens do what they must, and that duty cannot be forsworn. Because enough have died in this stupid war. Because Alistair's reign should not begin in blood. Because I am Ferelden, and he is the Hero of the River Dane." He sighed. "Choose your reason, Saitada. I weighed them all."

She looked at him, and then shook her head slowly. "Are you sure you are only sixteen?"

"It's what my father tells me, anyway." He slung the pack off his shoulder, then removed the blades from inside. He handed them to her. "I thought he'd want you to have these."

"Thank you, Jerath."

#

Cathiel nearly snarled at him. "If I despise you, it's because you deserve it."

Loghain merely stared at her. "Ah, now there's the venom I expected. Well, is that it? Surely you've more to say to me than that. Go on. Try out all the curses and insults you know. I'll teach you some new ones if they don't suffice."

"You're awfully smug for a failure."

"Ah, now that actually struck a glancing blow! Good work. And now what? Am I to be some trophy of your victory? The defeated enemy you drag about on a leash wherever you go? Or have you some worse fate in mind for me?"

"Just stay out of my way."

"Or what? You'll kill me? Go ahead. The Joining was my death sentence anyway. It's hardly my fault it failed to produce the desired result, Warden."

"This is still your death sentence. Remember that."

"I assure you, it's foremost on my mind."

Saitada wanted to hit them both. "Perhaps you two could simply avoid each other?"

Loghain actually smirked at her. "I'd be delighted to. It is, however, a small camp. We could dig a moat down the middle of it, perhaps. It will create some difficulty finding a place to pitch tents, I'm afraid."

She wanted to reach for her blade. "Loghain, just do as you are told."

#

Loghain glared at Leliana. "So you are a Fereldan girl, who decided to live in Orlais."

She turned her nose up at him. "I did not decide to live in Orlais. My mother took me there with her. I know how you feel about the Orlesians, but I am not one of them."

"You may as well be. You grew up there. Your views and values are theirs. Loghain: I have heard you speaking with the others. You find Ferelden unsophisticated, barely civilized."

"No, this is not true."

"You're painted to look like you're a Fereldan, but scratch the surface and find nothing but Orlais underneath."

Brehan stepped between them, his eyes narrow. "Halam sahin, es ar tu na'lin emma mi."

Loghain shook his head, and left them be.

#

Loghain saw Wynne looking at him again. "You can stop scowling at me, madam."

"Did I need your permission? I see."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. I confess: It was entirely my idea that Uldred consort with demons. I had a dastardly scheme in which the utter destruction of Ferelden's best weapon would benefit me, personally. Are you satisfied now?"

"Do you think your deal with Uldred was where you earned my contempt? I was at Ostagar. I witnessed Cailan's murder."

He smirked. "Such loyalty."

She folded her arms. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Did you try to save him, then? My apologies."

Wynne's hand tightened on her staff. "I was fortunate to escape with my life!"

"So you didn't rush to your king's rescue? I see. Then both of us left the boy to die."

"I was no general at the head of an army! I could never have reached him!"

"And I had no magic that could break those darkspawn ranks. But perhaps you think I ought to have tried, regardless. No doubt, the lives of mere soldiers are cheap in the eyes of the Circle."

"And what of all the soldiers who died with their king? Their lives were worth nothing to you."

That one actually struck. "You think so, do you? I knew their names, mage, and where they came from. I knew their families. I do not know how you mages determine the value of things, but they were my men. I know exactly how much I lost that day."

The young mage immediately came to the aid of the old one. "What are you playing at?"

"I beg your pardon?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

Lenore's eyes narrowed. "Don't think a few friendly words to Jerath will put him off his guard. He's no fool. None of us have forgotten what you've done."

"I have no idea what you are trying to suggest." If the mage thought he was actually manipulating that confounding young man...

Wynne shook her head. "Oh, there are so many things to

accuse you of, Loghain Mac Tir, that I hardly know where to begin. But we can save that for another time. For the moment, know that we are watching you."

He wanted to throw up his hands. "If watching me amuses you, feel free. Now, if you don't mine, I have things to attend to."

#

"Redcliffe is under attack."

Shale made a sighing sound. "Is anybody surprise? Anyone?"

"Jerath, take Loghain, Morrigan, Shale, and Oghren and clear out the lower section. The rest of you, with me," Saitada ordered.

Jerath immediately nodded and gestured for them to follow him. "She's still angry at you," Morrigan told Jerath.

"Why do you say that?" Loghain asked her.

"She stuck him with Oghren."

"I heard that," Oghren said, and belched.

#

Riordan met them in the hall. "It is a relief to see you unharmed."

"What news?" Saitada asked.

"The darkspawn that attacked Redcliffe were relatively few in number, I'm afraid. It was assumed the horde was marching in this direction... but that is not true."

Eamon joined them, sparing a glare for Loghain. "Riordan tells us that the bulk of the horde is, in fact, heading towards Denerim. They will be at the capital within the week."

"Are you sure?"

Riordan glanced at Eamon, then nodded. "I ventured close enough to 'listen in,' as it were. I am quite certain."

Jerath frowned. "Why then did you say it was headed here?"

Riordan shook his head. "The darkspawn line is wide, and many of them roam away from the main horde. Until now most of them have been spotted here in the west."

Alistair pointedly did not look at Loghain. "Not to mention that we've been too busy killing each other to pay much attention to some silly old darkspawn horde."

Riordan inhaled. "There is, I'm afraid one other piece of news that is of even greater concern. The archdemon has shown itself. The dragon is at the head of the horde."

"Maker preserve us," Teagan swore softly.

"But we can't reach Denerim within a week, can we? It's too

far," Alistair frowned.

"We must begin a forced march to the capital immediately, with what we have. Denerim must be defended at all costs."

"The archdemon is what's important," Jerath said.

Riordan nodded to him. "And only the Grey Wardens can defeat the archdemon. That is why we must go."

"Then we march," Alistair said. "And hope the army we've collected here give us the chance we need." He squared his shoulders. "Arl Eamon, how long before the army can set out?"

"By daybreak..."

Alistair nodded, and gave the order. "Then let's get them ready. I won't let all those people die without giving them a chance."

"I would like to speak with just the wardens, if I may," Riordan said. "There are a few things we need to discuss."

"We will be along shortly," Alistair told him.

#

Riordan gathered the wardens in his room. His face was grave. "You are all here. You are new to the Grey Wardens, and you may not have been told how an archdemon is slain. I need to know if that is so."

Alistair pointedly did not look at where Loghain was standing. "You mean there's more to it than just, say, chopping off its head?"

Riordan sighed. "So it is true. Duncan had not yet told you. I had simply assumed..." He shook his head. "Tell me, have you ever wondered why the Grey Wardens are needed to defeat the darkspawn?"

Lenore nodded. "It obviously has something to do with the taint within us."

"That is exactly what it involves. The archdemon may be slain as any other darkspawn, but should any other than a Grey Warden to the slaying, it will not be enough. The essence of the beast will pass through the taint to the nearest darkspawn and will be reborn anew in that body. The dragon is thus all but immortal. But if the archdemon is slain by a Grey Warden... its essence travels into the Grey Warden, instead."

Brehan asked the question for them. "And... what happens to the Grey Warden?"

"A darkspawn is an empty, soulless vessel, but a Grey Warden is not. The essence of the archdemon is destroyed... and so is the Grey Warden."

"Meaning... the Grey Warden who kills the archdemon..." Alistair looked at Cathiel, then back at Riordan. "Dies?"

"Yes. Without the archdemon, the Blight ends. It is the only

way."

Saitada hooked her thumbs behind her weapons, and nodded. "So it's up to us to kill this thing."

"In Blights past, when the time came the eldest of the Grey Wardens would decide which amongst them would take that final blow. If possible, the final blow should be mine to make. I am the eldest, and the taint will not spare me much longer. But if I fail, the deed falls on you. The Blight must be stopped now or it will destroy all of Ferelden before the rest of the Grey Wardens can assemble. Remember that. But enough. There will be much to do tomorrow, and little enough time to rest before it. I will let you return to your rooms."

"I will see you once the army is ready to march, then." Alistair gave him a respectful nod. "I guess this ends soon, one way or another."

"That it does, my friend, that it does."

#

Saitada lingered in the hall, watching Alistair take Cathiel's hand as they walked. Brosca and Lenore also held hands. Brehan walked past his room, and she was sure he was off to seek Leliana.

"One life." She jumped at the sound of Loghain's voice. She hadn't realized he and Jerath were still behind her. "After all this trouble, it seems like such a small thing to give up to see

this land safe, doesn't it?"

"It's hardly a small price."

Jerath twitched a shoulder. "Isn't it? Seems to be the currency these days. You pay it, and hope that the outcome is worthwhile."

"Are you willing to accept death if Riordan fails?"

Loghain gave her a look that suggested she was being ridiculous. "If it comes to that, yes. Gladly. If anyone should make this sacrifice, it ought to be me. Maker knows, I have enough to atone for."

"This was always meant to end in death," Jerath said. "Join us, brothers and sisters. Join us in the shadows where we stand, vigilant. Join us as we carry the duty that cannot be forsworn. And should you perish, know that your sacrifice will not be forgotten and that one day, we shall join you."

"So who gets to decide who lives and dies?" Saitada asked.

"You're commanding the armies you've raised, aren't you?" Jerath raised an eyebrow at her. "Isn't that what you were born to do?"

She sighed. "I didn't think of it that way."

Loghain nodded at her reluctantly. "I can offer advice, if you want, but this is your battle."

"This army was built from nothing by you. They don't follow me."

"And if I make mistakes, what then?"

"You'll deal with the results just like everyone else," Loghain said.

"If Riordan can't, I'll be the one to make the sacrifice."

Jerath shook his head at her. "What makes you think that choice is yours to make?"

"As you pointed out, I'm the commander here."

"Yes. You are. The general leads. The pawns make the sacrifice. Do you think the need for a leader will die along with the archdemon?"

Saitada turned to face him, giving him a long, appraising look. His face was expressionless, but for the first time, she wondered how much of it was a mask. "You are saying I should sacrifice one of you?"

"Yes." His voice was blunt.

Her own voice became angry. "And what if I pick you?"

He shrugged. "Then I die a full year later than I would have had I never become a warden at all, and I go out a hero on top of everything. Maybe the dwarves will put my face up on one of those statues."

"You..." She frowned at him. "You are actually joking about this. You find death amusing?"

"Depends upon who is doing the dying. I think, all things considered, my dying to save this... human... kingdom would have the Maker laughing hard enough to fall out of his throne."

"Laughing at death...it's a city elf thing?"

"When one is visited by an old friend, jokes and laughter are often to be expected. We've spent too much time in the company of death to start pretending it is some fearsome stranger. I remain your sword, Saitada. Sleep well."

"Jerath..."

"Yes?"

"You aren't my sword. You are my friend. All of you. I don't want to see any of you die."

"Then close your eyes. There are plenty who could show you how."

#

He watched Saitada walk away. "It's not her."

"Then after Riordan, it falls to me," Loghain said.

"Or me. Either way, it's not her. Or any of the rest of them. The world has further need of their like."

"Indeed. This next part won't be easy."

"If it were easy, they wouldn't need us."

#

Saitada found Alistair and Cathiel in the common room. "I take it everyone else was smart enough to get some sleep?"

"You know, you'd think being king and queen would get us some respect around here," Alistair said, looking at Cathiel.

"I treat you with as much respect as I ever have any royalty."

Cathiel laughed. "Fair point." The laugh died, leaving the room feeling empty. The silence grew, becoming awkward.

"So..." Alistair said. "If Riordan fails..."

Cathiel shrugged. "Then we feed Loghain to the Archdemon and kill two birds with one stone."

Saitada sighed. "A suggestion he recently made himself, in fact."

"And if he refuses?" Alistair's voice was angry. "What then?"

"Then I suppose it falls to me." Saitada's voice was firm. "Or to the last of us standing, should it come to that."

"I wonder why Duncan didn't tell us this before." Alistair leaned back in his chair.

Cathiel set her hand on his. "Probably because he intended to take the blow himself, and didn't want you to argue with him."

"I suppose you are right." He closed his fingers around hers. "It will be over soon, one way or another."

"Get some sleep. That's an order, your majesties."

"You know, for a princess, you really don't seem to get how royalty works."

"Bed."

"Fine, fine, we are going, put down the sword."

"You did good today, Alistair," Saitada said.

He smiled at her.

#

She was standing by his fire when he entered the room. "Do not be alarmed. It is only I."

"Morrigan? Is everything all right?" There was something in her voice.

"I am well." She turned to face him. "'Tis you who are in danger. I have a plan, you see. A way out. The loop in your hole. I know what happens when the archdemon dies. I know a Grey Warden must be sacrificed, and that sacrifice could be you. I have come to tell you this does not need to be."

It was time, then. The pieces were arranged on the board, and it was time for the endgame. "And how do you know about this?"

"I know a great many things. How I know is not quite as important as what I am offering you, however. I offer a way out. A way out for all the Grey Wardens, that there need be no sacrifice. A ritual... performed on the eve of battle, in the dark of night."

He began removing his armor. "Nothing comes without a price."

"Perhaps. But that price need not be so unbearable, especially if there is much to be gained. All I ask is that you listen to what I have to offer, nothing more."

"Very well." She'd waited this long. "What is your plan?"

"What I propose is this: lay with me. Here, tonight. And from our joining, a child will be conceived. The child will bear the taint, and when the archdemon is slain, its essence will seek the child like a beacon. At this early stage, the child can absorb that essence and not perish. The archdemon is still destroyed, with no Grey Warden dying in the process?"

He was angry. Angrier than he'd been since the rage had filled him. His voice remained calm. "It all comes back to joining, doesn't it?" He turned to face her. "Are you insane? This is your plan?"

"Think about what I offer you: the chance to avoid death. Or better yet, the chance to slay the archdemon and live as a hero. No Grey Warden has ever done this."

He laughed at her. "If you want someone who cares about either of those things, I suggest you go knock on Brehan's door. Or Alistair's."

"I..."

"You want to..." He clenched his fists. "Have my child? Make it darkspawn."

"No. I conceive a child, one who will be born with the soul of an Old God. I seek the essence of the Old God that once was and not the dark forces that corrupted it. Some things are worth preserving in this world. Make of that what you will. After this is done, you allow me to walk away... and you do not follow. Ever. This child will be mine to raise as I wish."

He wasn't sure if that were better or worse. "What do you intend to do with this child?"

"I do not wish to tell you."

His voice held a blade. "I insist."

"The child will represent freedom for an ancient power, a chance to be reborn apart from the taint. Is that not reason enough to do it? I will raise the child apart from the rest of society, and teach it to respect that from which it came."

Beyond that, you need know nothing else."

He needed to know so much more. "I see. Is this why you've been so... friendly to me?"

"Caring for you as I've come to... that was not part of the plan. But I cannot let what I feel interfere with what I must do. This is important to me. The fact that it may save your life makes me all the more determined to see it done. Please do not... cloud the issue. If you feel anything for me, then accept that it will make what we must do... that much easier."

"Will I ever see you again?" He wished the answer didn't matter to him so much.

"After the archdemon has been slain? No. No, you will never see me again. Refuse my offer, however, and I leave now. This is... simply how it must be."

He stood in silence for several minutes, staring at the wall. Finally, he turned to look at her. "One year."

"One year?"

"I give you one year. Then I start looking for you. You get what you want, the child. But as you pointed out, that means I may well live. And as long as I live, I will seek you. You, of all people, should know this."

"I..."

"Accept who I am, or go knock on another door."

"Very well."

He met her eyes. "All right. I agree."

"A wise decision. Come, my love. Put the thoughts of the ritual aside and let us make this last night together one to remember."

#

It started again when they made camp. Oghren stretched his legs to ensure there was no room on the log for Loghain to sit. He belched, and then looked up. "So what, now we're supposed to be best friends? Bosom buddies? Sit around the campfire and sing together?"

Loghain began to take his plate elsewhere. "Somehow, I have no desire to hear you sing, Dwarf."

Oghren spat. "Just don't start thinking that you belong here."

"Oh, I'm in no danger of that, I promise you."

"Good," Alistair muttered.

Jerath slammed the teacup he was drinking from down hard enough for the metal to break. "Enough! Bloody legends all. Daveth was a common pickpocket. Brosca was a hired thug. Riordan a thief. Duncan, Alistair, Duncan, was conscripted after committing theft and murder, murder of a Grey Warden, I might add. Criminals and malcontents, glory-seeking fools and those who wish only to die. Blood mages and rebels.

Unrepentant murderers, paragons, kingslayers, and kings. We. Are. Wardens. Now would you people kindly shut the hell up? We've got a long day of killing Darkspawn and saving this blasted kingdom tomorrow." He glared around the camp, challenge written on his face.

Feet shuffled. For a moment, there was silence.

"You heard the man, everyone. Get some sleep."

Most scattered, leaving only Saitada, Loghain, and Jerath at the fire. Loghain was looking at Jerath with an expression she'd last seen on her own father's face – paternal pride. "Jerath, Loghain, I apologize to you both. I should not have allowed the bickering to go on as long as it did."

"I... also apologize." Loghain said. "I should not have tried to draw anyone into a fight."

Jerath raised an eyebrow as they both looked at him. "I apologize for calling Daveth common. The man deserved more respect than that."

Loghain gave him a confused look as Saitada merely laughed. "Sleep well. Both of you."

#

"Do you think Alistair will be a better king than Cailan?"

Jerath shrugged. "Admittedly, my expectations for human kings are fairly low." He leaned into her as she sat beside him.

"I have something for you."

"What have you there? A mirror? It is..." Her voice softened. "Just the same as the mirror which Flemeth smashed on the ground, so long ago. It is incredible that you found one so like it. I am uncertain what to say. You must wish something in return, certainly."

"It's simply a present. For a beautiful woman."

"I have... never received a gift. Not one that did not also come with a price attached." For a moment, he thought she was actually going to cry. "But I would be a fool not to accept such a gesture with grace. Your gift is... most thoughtful. Thank you."

57. Chapter 57

"Before us stands the might of the darkspawn horde. Gaze upon them now, but fear them not. Those standing with me are Grey Wardens. They have survived, despite the odds, and without them, none of us would be here!" Alistair gestured to Saitada. "The Warden Commander was not born to Ferelden, but she fights with honor and passion. Today, we save Denerim! Today, we avenge the death of my brother, King Cailan! But most of all, today we show the Grey Wardens that we remember and honor their sacrifice. For Ferelden! For the Grey Wardens!"

The army charged. The arrows of the Dalish hunters crashed into the darkspawn ahead of the charging humans and dwarves. As the armies clashed, the hunters focused their fire on the darkspawn emissaries and archers on the heights, preventing them from raining death on the soldiers.

And then the gate was theirs.

#

"You've managed to fight your way to the gates. We're doing better than I hoped."

"Bloody nug runners! We're outnumbered three to one!"

Oghren shook his head.

"Bah, you say that like we haven't had worse odds," Broasca said.

Riordan shook his head. "The army will not last long, so we'll need to move quickly to reach the archdemon." He looked around. "We're going to need to reach a high point in the city... I'm thinking the top of Fort Drakon might work."

"Draw the dragon's attention," Saitada nodded.

"We have little choice, though I warn you that as soon as we engage the beast it will call all its generals to help it."

"Brehan?" Saitada said, turning to him.

He closed his eyes. "Two. One is in the market, near the Chantry. The other is in the alienage. The market doesn't have a lot of spawn, but those it does have are ogres. There are also ogres between us and Fort Drakon, as well as a fair number of emissaries."

"Seeking them out will be wise," Loghain said. "Not to mention killing them will help the civilians still in Denerim."

"Jerath, take Loghain, Morrigan, and Shale, and deal with the one in the Alienage. Sten, you've got Oghren and Wynne. Hold the gates. Brehan, I need your ears. Take Leliana and get Riordan past the spawn. We'll keep the pressure up on the generals, give you a clear line. The rest of you are with me."

#

Cathiel didn't want to think about it, but there was a very real chance this was goodbye. Wynne smiled at her. "All that we've been through has led up to this. Whatever happens now, to any of us, know that I am proud, infinitely proud, to have called you my friends. May the maker watch over you."

Oghren nodded. "So this is it."

"It's been an honor to fight with you, Oghren," Saitada told him.

He shook his head. "Honor? Nobody's looked at me and seen honor in a long time, Warden. You took in a drunken disgrace of an Orzammar warrior. You gave me a reason to fight and the will to keep going. Hell, those two birds even helped me find the one woman in the sodding world who might put up with me. I owe you a lot. I consider it a find honor to die for you and your cause." He put both hands on his axe. "Let the stone turn red from the blood of heroes. Today I will be the warrior you taught me to be."

"I would almost say that I feel concern for something other than myself, even maybe for certain soft, squishy companions... but that would be silly, wouldn't it?"

"It's scandalous to even consider the notion," Lenore said.

"I know! Please do not tell anyone. I doubt I could blush, but it would be so awkward." She shook her massive head. "And..."

do try not to get swallowed whole. If the beast were to fly about afterwards and poop it out, irony would dictate that it would land on me. I couldn't take it."

"You have carried us this far," Sten said, looking at Saitada. "Do not doubt that."

"Alright, people. We have a job to do." She drew her sword. "It won't be easy. But as a smart ass elf once said, if it was easy, someone else would do it. Let's move."

Alistair caught Cathiel's hand. "So this could be it. Soon this will be finished, one way or another."

"I love you, Alistair."

"And I love you. Always." He kissed her. She held him for a moment. On the other side of the field, she saw Brehan and Leliana doing the same thing. Beside them, Brosca, Lenore, and Zevran kept touching each other's hands. Jerath was already moving towards the alienage. She took a breath, and followed Saitada.

#

Brosca and Zevran moved almost as a single being. The dwarf would hamstring the ogre, while the elf would come in high, slashing at the throat as the ogre fell. Cathiel kept up a stream of arrows, retrieving as they moved. She saw Saitada take an ogre's hand off at the wrist before disemboweling it. And at the back of their group, Lenore rained lightning down,

taking advantage of the storm that was starting to rage above them.

Now and then they found guards, still fighting the good fight, but most were fleeing alongside the panicked civilians.

Lenore only barely managed to counter the spell the general threw at them. She gritted her teeth. "Move, I can't hold it long."

Alistair charged. He slammed his shield into the darkspawn's face. It tried to hit him with it's staff, and he broke the staff with a blow from his sword. It threw fire at him, and he blocked it with his shield before bringing his sword down. The head fell to the ground, and rolled. Cathiel saw the ogre baring down on him, and put an arrow in it's eye. It fell, and Alistair turned, and brought his sword down to finish the thing off.

Around them, cheers started to go up. She even heard a few cheering the name of King Alistair, and saw a look of wonder cross her beloved's face.

Zevran and Brosca were supporting Lenore. She dug a lyrium potion out of her belt pouch, and drank it. Then she took a second. Saitada gave her a worried look. "Lenore?"

Lenore's face was calm, almost serene. "Let's finish this, Commander."

#

Jerath moved through the alienage. He could sense the darkspawn at the other end. As he entered the square, he saw Shianni marshaling defenders. He caught a look of stunned surprise on Loghain's face as the elves prepared to hold their homes, some armed with no more than shovels.

"Cousin...?" Shianni's face broke into a wide smile. "Oh, am I glad to see you! The alienage is under attack." She pointed. "There is a large group of darkspawn approaching and the gates won't hold! We need your help."

"That's why we are here," Jerath said.

"Then we will stand with you." She held up her bow, her eyes determined. "This is our home and we're not going to let it fall."

"We're with you!" Other voices called out.

"Tell us what to do," Shianni said as she fell into step beside him. "And we'll fight for as long as we can."

"Put your archers on the roofs. When the gate falls, draw them back there, to the choke point." He smiled. "Shale, hold that point. Keep them off the archers. You, you, and you, if you don't have bows, throw rocks. You four, hold the stairs to the towers. Morrigan, I want you up in the tower there. Focus on weakening their lines. Loghain, you're with me."

Shianni blinked and gave Loghain a disbelieving look. Then she laughed. "You heard what he said! Come on!"

He moved to the gate, Loghain a pace behind. Loghain shook his head. "Maker, I actually think they'll hold."

"Of course they'll hold," Jerath said. "They are my people. Focus on the big ones."

"Yes, ser," Loghain said. Jerath glanced at him, and the man smiled.

#

She told him to hold the gates. He would have preferred to have the beresaad behind him. The humans had uncertain looks on their faces. Next to him, the dwarf stood, his axe in hand. The mage... odd how he no longer thought of her as saarebas... stood to one side, out of the way but prepared to render aid. The girl had left her hound with the order to guard Wynne, and the hound stood firm, prepared to fill it's role. After Saitada and Jerath, he thought he liked the hound best.

Asala was in his hand. She told him to hold the gates. The first wave came.

#

Brehan tracked the movements. "We need to to up. Over the roofs."

Riordan nodded. He grabbed hold of the sign over the merchant's door, and used it to pull himself up. Brehan held his linked hands for Leliana, then hoisted her up before pulling

himself up after. He nodded, and moved, knowing they would follow.

They leaped from roof to roof. Brehan left his hammer in the back sheath, returning to the long bow. They attacked only when needed, to prevent attention from being drawn to them.

He jumped to the next roof, then caught Riordan's hand as the man nearly fell. "There is an army between us and the gate of Drakon." He narrowed his eyes, then looked at Riordan. "How are you at mountain climbing?"

#

Saitada sent Brosca, Lenore, and Zevran down one alley, and gestured for Cathiel and Alistair to follow her down the other. They cleared the emissaries as they went, creating a path for civilians to flee and soldiers to enter. Seeing their king fighting for them seemed to give the people hope. Now and then she saw civilians pick up the weapons of the fallen and join the fight, holding the darkspawn back so that others could flee.

A boy, no more than ten, stood with a sword in his hand, while two little girls tried to pull a toddler to safety. A genlock charged, and then Alistair was there, his shield between the darkspawn and the children. A heartbeat later, there were a dozen guards there, fighting alongside their king, as other civilians got the children to safety.

More darkspawn started to charge, and then a storm exploded in their midst. Saitada looked past them to see

Lenore. Her hair stood out around her like a corona as she held her staff high, calling lightning down among the shrieks.

"Wow," Cathiel said.

Saitada grinned. "Come on, people. Let's not keep the archdemon waiting."

#

The gate fell. He fought back to back with Loghain. The human used his shield as a weapon as he laid about with his blade. Jerath spun, sword in one hand, axe in the other. Morrigan's spells fell among the darkspawn, holding them in place for the arrows of the elven archers.

Only a few hurlocks got past them. None of those got past the fists of Shale. "There," Jerath said. "The general."

"Let me guess," Loghain said. "He's the one behind the three ogres."

"It's far to late for you to die young, Loghain. Give me a boost?"

Loghain looked at him, then smiled. He dropped to one knee, holding his shield. Jerath leapt, landing on the shield, and Loghain lifted as the elf jumped again, going over the heads of the ogres. He rolled, came up on his feet, and drove the blade into the heart of the general. The firestorm the beast had been gathering dissipated.

He turned as the ogres did. Loghain drove his sword through the back of the first as Jerath came at the second. Shianni gave an order, and the third began to grow a garden of arrows as stones seemed to strike it from every angle.

Shale strode forward, lifted a fist, and smashed the last genlock to the ground in a splash of blood and gore.

Jerath cast his senses. "That's all of..." He blinked. "Shianni, get them under cover, go."

"You heard him," Shianni shouted.

Loghain shook his head. It was coming. "The other side of the bridge."

"Shale, move," Jerath yelled, and they turned to run.

The golem had barely made it to the other side when the fire hit the bridge, obliterating it. The archdemon roared a challenge as it climbed again.

A raven circled Jerath, then landed to become Morrigan. "We have drawn it's attention."

"To Fort Drakon," Jerath ordered. "Time to kill a god."

#

The dwarf may have been a drunk. He made have been crude. But she told him to hold the gates. And the dwarf did. The humans rallied to them, shield and blade. For a moment,

he was back with his brothers, in the heart of Seheron.

An ogre fell. No more came. She told him to hold the gates, and the gates held. A cheer went up among the defenders. Slowly, a smile spread across his face. There were no humans among the dead. They'd held.

"Shall I send word that the gates are secured?" a human asked.

"For the moment, yes," Sten told him.

"Right away."

It was up to the wardens now.

#

Brehan gave Riordan a hand up. The other warden nodded. Leliana looked out over the city. "Maker, look at them all."

He cast out his senses, then smiled. "The generals are down. The others are on their way."

"There," Riordan said. The archdemon was coming their way. Riordan adjusted his grip on his blades, and started to run. As the archdemon passed, he leaped.

Brehan unlimbered the hammer from his back. "Ma'arlath?"

"Vhenan?" she said, turning to him.

"Do you know how to work a ballista?"

#

She saw the figure fall from the back of the archdemon. For a moment, she hated herself for hoping it was Riordan, and not Brehan. Whoever it had been, their sacrifice had not been in vain. The archdemon faltered, and landed atop the fort.

"It's down. Let's go," Saitada said.

#

The darkspawn pressed them back, away from the gate. Lenore staggered, and fumbled for her belt pouch as the emissary gathered another spell. Saitada glanced towards Cathiel, and realized the woman was armed with long knives, having run out of arrows. Fire began to gather, and then the emissary's head was rolling across the floor. She saw a familiar figure standing behind it.

"Shale, get that gate open," Jerath ordered. "Morrigan, the archers."

Loghain stood next to the elf, shield at the ready. The darkspawn turned towards them, moving in. An anvil.

The gate opened. Saitada smiled. Time to bring the hammer.

#

Zevran and Brosca made short work of the traps. Cathiel had

retrieved additional arrows, and Saitada almost absently noted that Alistair was carrying a few extra quivers. Lenore and Morrigan were both downing lyrium potions.

"It's on the roof," Saitada said. "It's not alone. There are darkspawn with it now, and more on the way."

"I saw someone fall," Lenore said.

"Riordan," Jerath said.

"You sure?" Saitada asked.

Jerath nodded. "We... saw him land."

"He brought it down," Alistair said. "We have a chance."

"We are almost to the roof," Saitada said. "The Blight ends here."

#

"So we head to the end together, as it should be." Morrigan looked at him. "Once this is done, no matter how it turns out I will be gone. You are aware of this, yes?"

"Then let me thank you now, for what you have done."

Unshed tears shown in her eyes. "There is far more I might have done for you, had this been another time and we... been different people." She drew a breath. "Allow me to say only one thing before we go. I was foolish. This could have been

so much easier, yet I... cannot regret what was between us."
She met his eyes. "I will always remember you... my love."

"You know where to find me."

She smiled. "Let us see this finally done. The archdemon awaits."

They started up the stairs. Loghain fell into step next to him, and met his eyes. In a quiet voice, he said, "it was an honor to fight at your side, however briefly."

"The fight is not over yet."

#

He no longer worried about finding specific targets for the hammer. His swings now were merely to keep them back. Leliana loaded another bolt into the ballista. The three previous shots had bounced off the archdemon's hide, but they had served to keep the beast from trying to retake the air.

The door opened. He saw the others pour onto the roof. The hammer knocked a hurlock over the edge. Those at the base of the stairs began to turn, heading towards the others.

"Vhenan?"

"Keep firing. If it takes off, he died for nothing."

She shifted the aim, and fired.

#

Cathiel saw the ballista bolt catch the archdemon's wing as it turned to face them. She spared only a glance for its source. Leliana and Brehan were still in the fight.

"Cathiel, Lenore, Morrigan, take the heights. Shale, hold those stairs. Zevran, Brosca, go left. Jerath, Loghain, go right. Alistair, with me." Saitada began moving forward.

The darkspawn tried to rally to protect their master. Many fell before they even reached the blades of the wardens, as the arrows and spells of the others rained down. Tendrils of dark energy snared darkspawn and flung them from the heights as Morrigan unleashed her spells. Fire swept through their ranks, as Lenore brought forth an inferno. And then, the way was clear. She saw another ballista bolt fire as the archdemon attempted to launch itself at them. The beast roared in frustration.

They hit it almost simultaneously, using wolfpack tactics. When it turned its attention to one group, the other two groups hit it with everything they had. Cathiel saw Loghain standing alone, and realized with a start that Jerath had once again jumped atop something big enough to swallow him whole.

It moved too much for him to climb the neck. He drove his blade instead into its shoulder, and it staggered, lamed. He tumbled lightly to the ground landing on his feet. It turned towards him, enraged, and Alistair took the opportunity to drive his blade into in beneath its other shoulder. He had to

move backwards, quickly, only barely managing to get his shield up in time as it started to breath fire. Saitada moved in front of him, bringing her own shield to form a wall.

That's when Zevran and Brosca hit it from underneath, driving their blades into it. Their daggers weren't long enough to pierce vital organs, but the beast nearly swallowed the breath it was spewing at Alistair and Saitada. It roared and leapt backwards, spreading its wings as it reared. And a ballista bolt hit it in the stomach.

It fell.

#

Saitada looked at the archdemon, struggling to rise. She glanced back at her fellow wardens, panting with their exertions.

Loghain was the first to speak. "Let..."

Jerath didn't bother with words. He was moving before Saitada had a chance to react. "Jerath!" Loghain lunged forward, trying to grab the elf, but he did not move quickly enough.

Light exploded out of the archdemon as Jerath's blade penetrated its skull. Jerath held the sword as it shook, his own body seemingly vibrating with the energy flowing out. Saitada closed her eyes, unwilling to watch him die.

Silence.

She opened her eyes. The archdemon's remains were there on the rooftop, a ring of what appeared to be soot surrounding them. And there, standing in the rain, Jerath, sheathing his blade as though it were just another ordinary kill.

Below, she could see the darkspawn starting to flee, the people starting to cheer. And Jerath, rising and walking back to his companions.

"Jerath?"

"Yes?"

"What just happened?"

"The archdemon is dead."

"And you are alive."

He shrugged. "There are many mysteries in the world, Commander." He turned, and walked away. As he did, he looked up. She saw a raven winging its way to the south.

58. Chapter 58

The wolf pup lay in Brehan's lap. Brehan sat on the floor, with his head in the lap of Leliana. She thought he might actually be asleep.

Cathiel and Alistair were passing a bottle back and forth between them. They'd been doing it for the better part of half an hour, but barely a quarter of the bottle was gone. She'd sent Loghain and Jerath with the soldiers, to aid in clearing some spawn that had dug in rather than flee. Lenore and Brosca were overseeing the retrieval of the archdemon's corpse, and the gathering of the blood.

"It's done," Alistair said again, as if he couldn't believe it.

Cathiel leaned back in the chair. "What happens now?"

"We rebuild," Saitada said. "You and Alistair take the throne, and kick off Ferelden's golden age."

Alistair blinked. "Maker, that's right. I'm king now, aren't I?" He laughed softly. "I mean, I knew it, but, I didn't actually... know it, you know?"

"And we have to plan a coronation ceremony," Leliana said brightly. "And a wedding."

"Maker," Cathiel said. "We are going to get married."

"You aren't having second thoughts, are you?" Alistair asked.

"Of course not. It's just... Maker... I..." She sighed. "I always thought when the day came, I'd have Mother and Oriana there, bothering me and taking care of all the details."

Leliana gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll have Lenore, Wynne, Saitada, and I. We'll make sure you get pestered."

#

Alistair's speech was beautiful. It should be, it had taken Leliana and Brehan hours to write it. It cemented the alliances that had been forged in battle. Aid for Orzammar. Land for the Dalish. Respect for the elves. Freedom for the Circle. Honor for the Wardens. She wondered who had given him the idea to grant Howe's lands to the Wardens, then saw Cathiel's satisfied smile.

They stood as one, even Loghain included, as the crown offered it's gratitude. Alistair managed to sneak in officially granting her the title of 'Hero of Ferelden'. She wondered which of her companions was responsible for that one, and saw Lenore's satisfied smirk. What was it Brehan liked to say? Emma shem'nan.

Gorim stood with a small group of nobles. "Glorious," he said. "You've really showed this humans something. Forged an army. Took down a Blight."

"It's good to see you, Gorim."

"I'm not just here to witness the human spectacle, however. The assembly contacted me with a message for you." He shrugged, but smiled delightedly. "I guess they figured once a manservant, always a manservant. Ahhh, I don't mind. The thing is, we've both been given leave to return to Orzammar."

"Both of us?"

"Apparently. I went down with you, seems I rise back up with you too. Seems your brother is mighty grateful for what you did. We've been restored to House Aeducan, full rights and everything." He gave her an awestruck look. "There is a motion before the assembly to have you named a Paragon. Getting the humans to help Orzammar like you did... that should make it a lock."

"A... paragon?"

"Not a bad change from an exiled 'murderer', no? Congratulations, my friend." He shrugged. "Think you might head back home? To tell them of the humans coming, at the very least!"

"I suppose I should."

"Good. And I would be proud to take up my old position, if you'll have me." He gestured at the crowd. "At any rate, I'll let the humans get back to their dwarf worship." He laughed. "Still makes me smile to hear them talk."

She walked away, and found a quiet corner for a moment. Aeducan. Paragon. Big changes. She was expected to stay on as Warden Commander. And yet... Perhaps there was a better solution. She went to find Cathiel.

#

"Andaran atish'an, da'len." Ashalle looked him over, her eyes warm. "It is so wonderful to see you again, healthy and whole."

"Did the rest of the clan come with you?"

"I fear they were too afraid to come into such a great city. It is so different from what we are used to." She chuckled nervously. "I find myself constantly bewildered." He smiled. It was odd, now, how comfortable he was standing among the nobility of Denerim. "They send their well wishes with me. The keeper was especially proud at the word of your victory. She said she cannot wait to tell the other clans." She gazed up at him, and almost choked on her words. "And this thing you have done... land to settle one. I... I cannot express what this means to the clans. Imagine the look on the keeper's face when she learns of this. Will you come with me to tell her?"

"Gladly. Though I must return."

She hugged him. "Wonderful. You will see the joy this will bring... It will be a day to remember for a very long time." She put a hand on his arm. "I... I could build a house. On land that is my own, forever. Is that not the strangest thought?"

"I look forward to visiting it."

"I should not take up so much of your time. Go, da'len. Celebrate your victory and be merry. The gods smile on you, truly."

#

Cyrion shook his head and smiled. "My, my. I almost don't recognize my own son. First a Grey Warden and now a great hero? And you've even made me a nobleman, the voice of our people? I barely know what to think. I am awed, and so proud... if only your mother had lived to see this day."

"I don't know if having a bann will change anything." Alistair had tried to convince him to take the job. He'd suggested his father instead. There were... things to consider. Debts still to be paid.

"And this is your fault? If anything, for Fereldan to have elven heroes will only do us good. Perhaps in time, with a new human on the throne, things will change for us. I can only hope it will be so. But never mind your old man. There is much for the heroes of Ferelden to do today, yes? Go... I shall speak to you soon." He gave Jerath a small shove towards the party.

#

"It is very strange to hear so many speak of a mage in such glowing terms," Irving said. "Deserved, of course, but still not

what I am accustomed to." He gave her a bewildered look. "I must thank you, however, for freeing the Circle from our shackles. That was most unexpected, indeed. You could have asked for anything."

"I did what I thought was right."

He gave her a warm, grateful smile. "Most would have asked for wealth, or power. Thank you. This is a gift we will not abuse." He sighed. "Now, I should leave you to your celebration. Uldred's revolt has left me... very quick to tire these days. Retirement will come soon, I think."

"Give everyone my love." Lenore smiled. "Even Greagoir."

"I look forward to seeing what you accomplish next."

#

"A Grey Warden. And now a hero, too? A bit different from the slums, hmm?"

"Aren't you married to a king?" Brosca asked, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"Ha! I'm his concubine, but it's a comfortable position anyhow, I'll give you that." She laughed softly. "Mother swore off drinking when she heard about what you did. She's been sober ever since. And as ill as a fellcat in water." She took a deep breath. "I should tell you, the Assembly actually sent me here. Officially, I'm an ambassador... can you imagine? Me!

Apparently, miracles abound these days." She shook her head. "They want me to tell you that you're free to return to Orzammar. They've made you a full citizen. Technically, you're warrior caste."

He blinked. "Can they do that?"

"I don't know, but they did." She elbowed him lightly. "Of course, that means Mother is risen up, too. She's been lording it over all her friends, calling them 'lowly peasants'. I hear they're considering making you a Paragon. Statue and everything. Not bad, brother. Not bad at all."

All he could do was stare at her, his mouth hanging open. After a moment, she reached over and shut it, then laughed. "Anyhow, I intend to get back to sampling this human wine," she said. "I'd like to forget there's a giant sky up there. How they live up here, I'll never know."

"You'd be surprised how fast you get used to it."

#

"It's good to see you again, kadan." Sten looked around. "These people... they call you 'hero'. It's a strange word, but I think I understand it's meaning. The arishok on occasion has declared a qunari to be qunoran vehl, one who serves as an example to others. Such examples are always made after their death, however. A death in service to the Qun. A living qunoran vehl would be too proud."

"Do the qunari celebrate and put on parades?" Saitada asked.

"When a qunoran vehl is declared, certainly. It is one of the few occasions when the qunari are permitted to engage in... revelry. There is imbibing of spirits, public chanting, meditations abandoned... it is madness."

She forced her face into a serious expression. "That would be quite a sight."

"It is... interesting. It can take days for the Ben-Hassrath to restore order. There may even be executions." He looked down at her. "I suppose I should tell you... I have decided to return to my people. Your quest is done, and thus so is my reason for accompanying you."

A heartbeat passed. And she made a decision. "I could go with you, if you like."

He blinked. "Is that truly what you want? There is much to hold you here, and it is a long journey."

There was much to hold her here. Perhaps too much. She wasn't ready to go back to Orzammar, and play the game and pretend. "Somebody has to make sure you stay on the path."

"You would...?" He actually looked startled, then he smiled. "Oh. You are joking. That is... funny." He tilted his head at her. "If you truly wish to come, I have a ship prepared to leave in two days time."

Two days was long enough. "I'll be there."

He looked pleased. "Meet me at the docks after all this celebration is over. It would be good to continue our travels."

#

"So it appears that Riordan was wrong. I find it difficult to believe that he deliberately misled us. Have you another explanation for what happened?" Loghain glanced down at the man he was still surprised to consider a friend.

Jerath shrugged. "Does it matter? Ferelden has driven back a Blight, accomplishing in a year what took Orlais, the Anderfels, the Free Marches, and the Tevinter Imperium over a decade."

"I should be content, yes? Still, the Orlesian Grey Wardens have been persistent with their questions. I intend to keep any thoughts on the matter to myself. I understand you are returning to the Wardens. As am I. I have been tapped to lead up their recruitment efforts here in Ferelden. Anora's influence, no doubt. I would have preferred she not interfered."

"A small concession in return for her service to the crown. She loves you, obviously. And it seems a fitting task."

"True enough. Allow me to say before I go that you have earned my respect. Odd that I ended up here, saying that, but there it is. Return to your celebration. I shall see you with the

Wardens."

#

Brehan moved her through the steps of the dance with an ease that belied the fact she'd only taught him the steps the night before. She smiled at him. "So here we are. The conquering hero has one the day, and now he takes his bow and exits the stage. A fine ending."

"It doesn't have to be an ending."

"I'm glad to hear that." She took his hand as they moved through the line of dancers. "You know, I can't help but think of my vision. Whether it was the Maker sending me to you, or whatever... it was a good thing." She met his eyes. "I thought I was supposed to save you, to show you the way... but it seems it was meant to be the other way around. Odd how that works, no?"

"I think you did plenty."

"Flatterer." She gave him a coy look. "So, if I heard right, you'll be leaving soon. Any room for an extra body on your travels?"

"Only if it's you."

"Good. I imagine that whatever you get up to, it'll be anything but boring." The dance came to an end. "At any rate, I should let you get back to your celebration before someone drags

you away." She kissed him. "I look forward to seeing you again afterwards."

#

"May I speak with your majesties for a moment?"

"Of course," Alistair said.

"Just one majesty," Cathiel said. "Until the wedding."

"I'm going to pass the title of Warden Commander to Jerath."

Cathiel and Alistair exchanged a look. Slowly, they both nodded. "Why?" Alistair asked.

"I have matters to settle in Orzammar. I'm thinking of going to Par Vollen to speak with the Arishok regarding the Blight and Wardens. I could use a vacation." She sighed. "And if we don't come up with a reason for him to stay, I'm worried he's going to take off to look for Morrigan."

"We've been worried over that last one," Cathiel admitted.

Alistair nodded. "I was considering insisting he take up the position of Elven Bann."

Saitada nodded. "So neither of you object?"

They exchanged a look. Cathiel slowly nodded. "I realized... I think it was just after the tower, that if something happened to you, we'd be following Jerath. It occurred to me I should have

been annoyed that you sent him to take Soldier's Peak, but I wasn't. He was the right man for the job. I think... if it's not you, it has to be him. And keeping him with the wardens is a good thing."

Saitada nodded. Then she exhaled. "They are thinking of making me a paragon."

"Maker."

Alistair considered a moment. "So... if you are a paragon, and I am a king... which of us outranks the other?"

#

"You are still staying on as court mage, I hope?" Cathiel asked.

"There has not been a mage advising the throne in a long time," Wynne said.

Cathiel hugged her. "I'm glad you think this is worthy of your time."

"I will not lie motionless in bed, with coverlets up to my chin, waiting for death to claim me." She smiled fondly. "So you had better listen to me, because I swear, if I should fall before the end and you don't seem to be doing things properly, I'll get up again to give you a good finger-wagging."

"I'll hold you to that promise."

"You know, I think the two of you are going to do just fine."

#

"Humans have a better taste for spirits than I thought. Heh. The ale up here is actually good." He took a drink of that ale. "Orzammar ale tastes like dirt in comparison. Probably because they put dirt in it. Go figure."

Saitada shook her head fondly. "Think you might go back to Orzammar?"

"I'm getting used to that big sky up there. And I'm thinking I might just look up Felsi again... see where that goes."

"You're done adventuring?"

"Maybe for a bit. Talk to me in a year or so when I'm bored, maybe I'll think differently."

"I might be back by then."

"Ah well, enough babbling. That pot-bellied son of a whore Teagan said I'd pass out before drinking an entire barrel of pickle juice. I am to prove him wrong."

She laughed. "Don't ever change."

"Who, me?" He snorted. "It's been good traveling with you, Warden. Don't get lost in the shuffle, now."

#

"You are staying with the Wardens then?" Saitada asked him.

"Yes." Jerath glanced at her.

"Then I suppose this is yours." She handed him the commander's helm they'd retrieved from the vault.

He blinked. "You aren't staying?"

"Oh, I'm staying a warden. Just not staying in Ferelden. I'm heading to Par Vollen with Sten. We can answer the question for the Arishok, and then perhaps do some recruiting among the Qunari."

"That could be... interesting."

"So you'll take the post?"

He considered for a moment. Then he shrugged. There was only one answer. The duty could not be forsworn. "Of course."

"Good." She gave him a worried look. "Jerath... Where is Morrigan?"

"That's a very good question."

"I take it she's behind the 'you not being dead' thing?"

"That would be a rational conclusion."

"Someday, Jerath, I'm going to ask you a question, and you

are going to give me a straight answer."

"I believe I did just a few moments ago, when you asked me if I would take up the post of Warden Commander."

"The official title is 'Commander of the Grey'."

"I suppose it's better than 'swordy-person with griffin fetish'."

Saitada grimaced. "Please don't give Cathiel any ideas."

#

"I will be relieved when all this pomp and ceremony is done." Zevran winked. "Such events are perfect opportunities for assassins, after all. I can't help but expect the Crows to appear at any moment. Which would be a welcome break, mind you."

"You think the Crows will still come after you?" Lenore asked.

He shrugged. "Eventually. With Taliesen dead, it may take them time to figure out what has happened... but they are like the tides. Predictable."

"So how about we go looking for them instead?" Brosca asked.

Zevran blinked. "You did say earlier you were planning on leaving soon. Is that true?"

"Why?" Lenore asked, batting her eyes at him. "You want to

come along?"

He smiled. "It occurs to me that I live better than I'm near you. And that's aside from any other... ancillary... benefits."

"And those are good benefits," Brosca said, encircling Lenore's waist with one arm. He held his other hand out to Zevran.

Zevran took the hand, then extended his other hand to Lenore. "Then let us not spend any time apart. It shall be an adventure to remember!" He considered a moment. "Well... another one."

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Cathiel glanced over at her soon-to-be husband, who was practically dancing with excitement. "What is it?"

Alistair grinned at her. "I have a surprise for you!"

"Oh, is it bigger than a breadbox?" She batted her eyes.

"Considerably." He opened a door, and revealed...

Her heart skipped a beat. "Fergus."

He swept her up into a hug. "When I heard my little sister was not only a Grey Warden, but also leading Ferelden into battle? I was surprised, to put it mildly. Father... he would have been so proud of you. I know I am. You've done good."

She clung to him. "Howe paid for what he did. I killed him myself."

"Howe has lost everything. That bastard. Vengeance is bitter, but I think about Oren... it barely seems like it's enough. At least Amaranthine now belongs to the Grey Wardens. There's some justice in that, I think. I need to go back to Highever. See if I can clean up the mess Howe made of it. I will see you soon, I hope?"

"Ser Gilmore also survived. He can help you. I'll see you at the wedding, for certain."

Fergus chuckled. "My little sister... marrying the king. All I can think is what Mother would have said about that. Take care of yourself, you hear? Or I'll find you and nag you like Mother did until you're ready to tear out your hair."

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Brosca found Jerath standing on the castle battlements. He was twisting a ring around on his finger. Brosca walked over and leaned on the rampart next to him. "So, you're the bloke in charge now."

"Everyone else ducked."

He laughed. "Fireball and I are going to take care of a couple of Zev's lingering problems. We'll be back though." He shook his head. "Remember lookin out over the wilds, waiting for sunset?"

"I do."

"Ever think we'd all make it?"

"I was fairly sure one of us would kill Brehan."

"I was bettin on it bein you, actually, then he went and turned into a decent bloke." He looked back over his shoulder.

"Party's over. Fireball and Zev passed out. Can't hold their bloody liquor." He hesitated. "You okay, Junior?"

"I think I am."

"So, now what?"

Jerath shrugged. "Remember that one nobleman who didn't back us at the Landsmeet?"

"Yeah?"

"He's got some gems called the Tears of Andraste. Want to go steal them?"

Brosca laughed. "After you, Commander."